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THE
COMPLETE
BOOK

COMBAT MISSION

(Original title: KINGS GO FORTH)

A novel of men at war—with the
enemy and with each other



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JOE DAVID BROWN

HAND-TO-HAND

COMBAT... “A German sentry stepped from the shadows. I hit him in the belly hard and low. He crumpled.

“Britt leaped on top of him. His knees landed solidly on the man’s rib cage. His arm flashed downward. He had struck the Jerry in the chest twice before I realized he was using his trench knife.”

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—*Boston Sunday Herald*

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COMBAT MISSION

(Original title: **KINGS GO FORTH**)



JOE DAVID BROWN



POCKET BOOKS, INC.
New York

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COMBAT MISSION

(Original title: *Kings Go Forth*)

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To

GENE McHUGH

In Affection and Gratitude

COMBAT MISSION

ONE

I liked his looks
The first time I saw him.
It was in a little town
In Italy.
I can't recall the name of it;
Doubt if I ever knew.
There were so many little towns,
So damned many . . .

I am always amazed
To find men who can rattle off
The names of places they fought,
Or who collected souvenirs
During the war.
I didn't notice
My surroundings;
I stayed half-dead, I think,
Maybe because, then—
It wasn't so hard to die.
And I didn't want trophies
For my walls,
To remind me of men
I had killed.
I wanted them to stay buried
Deep
In their stinking graves,
And, deeper still,
In my memory.
I don't even cherish names
Of big battles.
If I remember them at all,

It is because of a river
That had to be crossed,
A hill
That had to be taken,
Or a bottle of wine I found
Or an egg . . .
And, sometimes,
More often than I like to recall,
Because of a friend
Who died.

 This particular little town
Was very much like all the rest.
Clusters of gray Middle Ages buildings
Huddled around smelly cobblestone streets.
The *paesanos* were threadbare
And half-starved.
They called us Joe,
Threw flowers at us
When we arrived,
And abuse at us
When we departed.
In some way or another
(According to what they started with, I suppose)
War and hunger had almost
Destroyed them.
The men sold their friendship
And the women peddled their love
Very cheaply.
In the market place
You could buy either
For a K ration—
Or a bar of yellow laundry soap.

I was standing in front of the command post when a dusty six-by-six truck arrived from Naples with our replacements. They tumbled out over the tailgate with that eager, yet half-frightened look all green troops have when they reach the line. Their web equipment was new and their boots still had a garrison shine. They were bunched around the rear of the truck when an 88 shell came screaming over, low and fast.

Most of them buckled their knees and crouched low. Some took cover under the truck. I noticed him then. He hadn't moved and he hadn't even glanced up. He was of medium height and had the straight-backed, trim figure which seems to belong in uniform.

He had regular, even features. Maybe he was a bit too handsome, but he looked alert and assured. He was somewhat older than the others, in his late twenties. There were T/5 chevrons on his new combat jacket.

He saw me coming.

—Ten-shun! he called, and came to rigid attention.

—Knock it off, I said. The other men took me at my word, but he came to a parade-ground At Ease.

—What's your name, soldier? I asked.

He snapped back to attention.

—T/5 Britt T. Harris, sir, he said, and rattled off his serial number. He was a Southern, but not a corn-pone type.

—What's your job?

—Radio operator, sir, he said.

I had been studying him. He was some soldier, everything by the numbers.

—Okay, Harris. You're my man. Come with me.

—Yes, sir. Does the lieutenant want me to bring my gear? That third person business was the tip-off.

—You're a regular? I asked.

There was the slightest pause.

—No, sir.

I knew he hadn't learned his military manners in the war-time Army. But it wasn't any of my business.

—Leave your gear, I said.

We went into the CP and found the fat T/3, who was battalion clerk, stretched out on an old broken-down sofa. He opened one eye.

—I've got my new radio operator, I said. Take his name and serial number.

The clerk closed his eye again.

—The old man's already assigned the replacements. You'll have to take the one he's given you.

—Shut your fat mouth, I said, and do as I tell you. Harris stiffened.

The clerk sighed.

—You shouldn't talk like that now. They've made you a gentleman.

He got up and took Harris' serial number and name and we left the CP.

—We've got quarters in a house up the street, I said. —I'll give you a hand with your gear.

—The lieutenant doesn't have to bother, he said.

I stopped and faced him.

—Look, you can knock off this West Point business.

That scored too well. He flushed beet-red.

—Is it West Point?

Again the barest pause. —No, sir. VMI.

—Graduate?

—Yes, sir.

—Okay, I said, let's have it out now. It'll save a lot of bother later. Why aren't you an officer?

He was dead-panned, looking straight ahead. —It's hard to explain, sir.

—Try, I said.

He hesitated.

—Try with little words.

He looked straight ahead. —I went to VMI because my father went there. He was a captain in the First World War and was a military buff all his life. He died in 1938—the year I graduated. I didn't care for the Army. I don't like military life. I went home and took over my father's interests. He hesitated a moment. —We have mills, textile mills—in Mississippi.

—Very nice, I said. —We need some class in our squad. But I still want to know why you're showing up as a simple little T/5. And why are you so late, Harris?

He was still giving me the military treatment, his eyes fixed on my hairline. —When my number came up, I asked for deferment because of my—my job. There was some litigation and—well, some notoriety about it. Finally, I realized the whole thing was stupid so I asked to go in the Army.

I didn't try to keep contempt out of my voice.

—And when you finally decided to come play with the other boys, they wouldn't give you a commission . . . is that it?

—Something like that, sir, he said.

—Suppose you tell me about this litigation?

Two spots of color appeared on his cheeks, but his voice stayed level. —They accused me of trying to . . . influence a member of the draft board.

—Did you?

—He was an employee of mine at the mill. I gave him an automobile as a bonus. They tried to claim it was a bribe.

—A Cadillac, I suppose? I asked sarcastically.

There wasn't a flicker on his stony face. —No, sir. It was a Chevrolet.

—Small potatoes, Harris, I said. —Very small potatoes.

I looked at his set face a moment.

—Well, why are we honored? From reluctant civilian to parachutist is a pretty big jump, isn't it?

—I had to prove some things to a few people, sir.

That sounded as if it were an honest answer. I didn't say anything. I waited.

His voice was flat, without a suggestion of either appeal or apology. —I hope I'll be accepted without prejudice, sir.

—Oh, you will, Harris, I said. —We're always glad to see a man who admits to his honest mistakes. We need men like you. In fact, we needed them a long time ago.

Suddenly I was tired of the little game. I snapped, —At ease! He dropped his eyes and I caught them with mine for the first time. His eyes were level, almost too level.

—Don't let my little bars fool you, I said. —I got them only a couple of months ago. I'm just a GI in officer's clothes, Harris. I'm not impressed by your military training and I damn sure don't get a bang out of your record. You're a real high-class guy, I guess, and when we get out of the Army . . . if we get out of the Army . . . drive your Caddie around to the filling station where I work and I'll fill the tires and call you sir. But all I want from you now is for you to work your little radio. You'll be treated like everybody else. But if you goof off and don't work that radio right, I'll forget I'm an officer and kick your tail up around your neck. Now get your gear and let's move.

You expect heavy casualties among green troops. Our re-

placements were unluckier than most. It was just dark enough to light a candle and I was getting ready to go to the officers' mess for dinner when an explosion rattled the windows. There was a short silence—an agonized scream. Then, wham! wham!—two more explosions. I knew from the muffled sounds that they were mines. When I stepped outside, *paesanos* and soldiers were clattering across the cobblestones toward an orchard on the other side of the square.

I was the first officer to arrive. At the wire fence around the orchard I found the young freckled-faced Sergeant who was in charge of the replacements. He was surrounded by soldiers and jabbering, gesticulating *paesanos*. His lips were trembling.

—It's them new guys, Lieutenant, he said. —I tole 'em to find a place to bivouac and they musta gone in the orchard. I thought they knowed that place was filled with mines.

I looked toward the orchard. The rising moon cast just enough light for me to make out the outlines of the nearest trees. —Quiet! I said to the jabbering *paesanos*. From somewhere in the orchard I could hear low moans and one voice that said over and over again, —Oh, God! Mama. . . . Oh, God! Mama. . . .

—Ever'body knowed it was mined, said the sergeant. —Ever'body *shoulda* knowed it was.

I motioned to him to be quiet. I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted, —Listen, you men in there. This is Lieutenant Loggins. Stay where you are. Don't move. You'll touch off more mines. Don't move an inch!

I turned to the sergeant. —Tell the switchboard to get the engineers up here. On the double. Tell them to bring their detectors.

—Yessir, he said, and scurried away.

The colonel came up and I explained what had happened. We stood helplessly and peered into the orchard. There was still no sound except the low moans and the solitary voice chanting, —Oh, God! Mama. . . . Oh, God! Mama. . . .

The colonel raised his voice. —Can you men in there hear me?

A match flared in the orchard.

—Douse that light! we shouted.

For the first time there was an answer from the orchard. It was a young voice, shaken.

—You gotta hurry up! They's men bleeding to death in here. They's men got their legs blowed off!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure slip through the fence. I shouted, —Hey, you . . . hold . . .

Either the man didn't hear me, or he ignored me. He was already ten yards inside the fence, walking almost briskly toward the heavy shadows. He stopped. In the faint light from the moon his face was a white blur as he removed his helmet. We heard the rattle as he dropped it to the ground. He walked five more yards with his stiff pace. We watched breathlessly. Every step took guts. It took guts even to watch him. We saw the flash of his arms in the moonlight as he removed his shirt.

—Why is he taking off his clothes? somebody muttered.

He had reached the shadows now, still moving at that stiff, parade-ground pace. It was so quiet that we could hear his footsteps. Involuntarily I felt myself tense at each one. A half-dozen muffled steps and then a pause and a slight flurry as some clothing hit the ground. Only that and that solitary cry, fainter now: —Oh, God! Mama. . . . Oh, God! Mama. . . .

It couldn't have taken more than a minute. It seemed a gut-tightening eternity. We expected each step to touch off a shattering, rattling explosion. Then his voice came from the shadows. It was brisk and businesslike.

—They are all here in close order. Have the medics take a bearing on my clothing.

I don't think I was surprised when I heard his voice.

The medics went in then, moving cautiously. They had them all out by the time the engineers arrived with their detectors. Four were dead. Two had lost legs. Five others were hospital cases.

The crowd drifted away. I waited by the fence.

He was buttoning his shirt. He dropped his hands quickly when he saw me. Anger made my voice rasping.

—Well, you're quite a guy, aren't you, Harris? A real smartie . . . a real big hero.

He didn't change expression.

—Do you want your medal now? I asked. —Or maybe you'd rather the general gave it to you.

—I thought speed was essential, sir, he said evenly.

—So it was, Harris. So it was, I said. —Have you ever heard of a branch of service called the engineers?

He stood silently.

—Answer me! I barked.

—Yes, sir.

—Have you ever heard of an invention called mine detectors?

—Yes, sir.

—Then, don't ever again let me catch you bulling in somewhere when it's a job for detectors. Do you understand that, Harris?

—Yes, sir.

—Did you hear me order you to stop when you went in there tonight?

There was the briefest pause. —No, sir.

—That's too bad, I said. —Your temporary deafness has cost you your stripes. Cut 'em off tonight.

—Yes, sir.

—That's all.

—Yes, sir.

He wheeled and started away at that brisk parade-ground pace.

I had to say it. —Oh, Harris.

He turned.

—Yes, sir.

—I could be wrong about you, I said. —It took guts to go in there tonight. If I am wrong, I'll make it up to you.

For the first time I saw him smile. It was a small smile.

—Yes, sir, he said.

TWO

It's always the strange ones
Who cause you trouble.
I'd seen all kinds.
In training, it was a big, blond sergeant
With the heroic biceps and thighs of a Michelangelo
sculpture.
He almost became a legend.
He could do push-ups with either hand
And he used to run us until we collapsed,
Then stood laughing at us.
Once he climbed a 250-foot training tower
(At Fort Benning, Georgia, this was)
And, holding a parachute in his open arms
Like a pile of dirty laundry,
He jumped off into space.
But when we had our first artillery barrage
In North Africa,
He ran away.
They didn't find him until the next day,
Six miles behind the lines.
He was whimpering
Like a baby
And his pants were soiled.
In the days of single combat,
He would have been our champion.
He would have made a good one.
But he didn't have the guts
To lie still
And die like a worm,
Pulverized in the mud

By an enemy who didn't have eyes
To be impressed.

There was a rifleman
Who had a fine old Southern name.
He was a gentleman
But he had killed his best friend
In a drunken brawl.
Somehow he wrangled his way
Out of the penitentiary
And into the Army.
When we met our first machine-gun nest,
The rest of us took cover.
He brandished his carbine
(Very much like a cavalry saber)
And, yelling, charged it
Singlehanded.
He got what he wanted from the Army:
A respectable death.

There was a pink-cheeked little lieutenant
Whom fear made as merciless as a Hun.
During a fire fight
In a Sicilian village
I was standing right by his side
When a Jerry came slithering from a ditch
On his belly
With half his leg shot away
And holding up his hands
Imploringly.
The lieutenant went mad
With eye-rolling terror.
With one quick gesture,
He grabbed the wounded man's long hair,
Pulled his head back,
And with a trench knife
Cut his throat.
All that day
I watched him closely
As we marched along.
He kept kicking the dust in the road, muttering,
—I'd do it again!

—I'd do it again!
Before nightfall,
Mercifully (it seemed to me)
He got a bullet through his head.
 You soon learn that war
Is a game for pros.
Things go better when,
Finally,
Men learn that it is only a trade
(A stinking, filthy trade)
And learn to use their tools
And avoid
The occupational disease.
But before the pros take over
The best
And the worst
Have to go.
They go quickly
And, oddly, it always seemed to me,
At about the same rate;
The best
Because they were the bravest;
The worst
Because they were not quick.
The longer a man fights
The shorter his odds,
And he knows he has to be efficient.
An efficient workman is the best workman.
You learn to mistrust volunteers
In the Army
And men who are fighting another war
Within themselves.

The colonel sent for me the next day. His name was Ros-
enwell. He was a West Pointer. We had been together since
training. He was the best officer and one of the finest men
I had ever known. He was killed on Christmas Day, during
the Ardennes breakthrough.

He motioned toward a paper on his desk. —I'm going to

yank this man's stripes, Sam. He's your man and you ordered it. But I'd like to hear more about it.

—It was a dumb, grandstand trick, I said. —The engineers were on the way. Besides, I hollered to him to come back and he ignored me.

—Maybe he didn't hear you.

—That's what he says.

He smiled. —I can recall a few times when you haven't heard orders.

I shrugged.

—It took guts to go in there in the dark. And it was smart of him to mark a trail with his clothes. I wouldn't have gone in there, would you?

—We've both got too much sense, I said.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. —Yeah.

—We would have gone if we'd been ordered, I said.

—Yeah, he said again. He smiled slightly. —You're a hard man, Sam.

I didn't say anything.

He looked at me seriously. —You're a first-rate officer, Sam. If you weren't so tough, you'd be a great officer. The rest of the men just think you're tough and let it go at that. I know better. I found it out that time we lost O'Hara. We were sitting there in the ditch beside him and I suddenly realized you were furious at him. You hated his guts, Sam, because he got killed. I understood you then. My father was like that. He was regular Army, all his life, but the only time he ever barked at my mother or us kids was when we got sick. I was grown before I realized that was just his reaction when he found himself helpless—when he met up with something he couldn't cope with.

—That's the way you are, Sam. You didn't start the war. You can't chip off a little piece of yourself every time a man gets killed or wounded. You can't bleed for all of them. Don't be too hard on them when they worry you. No matter how much military training a man has had, he's still an amateur until he gets shot at a few times. They've all got to learn. It's not your fault if some of them get killed in the process. Just be glad they keep coming. These kids we get—tramping through mine fields and getting their tails blown

off—they're our greatest asset. Did you know that? An army's just as good as the reinforcements it gets from home. As long as we get healthy, eager-beaver kids we don't have to worry. Once we start getting men who are too smart, or too civilized, or who are afraid—well, then, we can fold up and go home. We burn up these kids fast, but that's what keeps us locomoting.

He smiled ruefully and signed the order and pushed it to one side.

—You know, I was going to suggest that we put him in for something . . . maybe a citation, anyway.

—Save it, sir, I said. —You'll get your chance to give him a medal.

I watched him closely for a couple of days, perhaps too closely. He fitted in well with the rest of the squad. His trip in the mine field helped. Otherwise, it might have taken him longer. He was a little too GI, too snappy.

Getting along together was important. We were a forward-observation crew, artillery liaison, we were called, and most of the time we had to live in each other's pockets. There were only five of us. Except for my sergeant, a tall, quiet Kentucky kid named Elmo Rogers, who had been with me since Salerno, all were fairly new. Besides Harris, who was the radio operator, there were two riflemen, both pfc's, named Breglio and Harmer. Technically, we should all have been artillerymen, but since the colonel wanted the men to have the extra pay a combat infantryman's badge gave them, I was, strictly speaking, the only artilleryman in the group.

It really didn't make any difference. Our outfit was a combat team, composed of a regiment of infantry, a battalion of artillery, a company of engineers and a company of medics. We worked together as a unit. My squad ate with the infantry, traveled with the infantry and fought with the infantry. Our job was to stay close to the colonel and give him artillery support when it was needed to repulse Jerry or blast a hole through his lines.

When we jumped in combat our artillery consisted of 75 mm. pack howitzers which were broken down and dropped with us. But in Italy we were being used as shock troops to

claw a hole in Jerry's lines and keep him on the move. Besides our pack howitzers, we were supported by the regular artillery, ranging from fast-firing little 90's to massive 240's, which were trailing us up the muddy, hilly, rocky Italian peninsula.

My squad carried weapons and we had to use them. But our most effective weapon was a radio. It was an ordinary two-way radio which was supposed to be carried in a jeep. We lugged it on our backs, broken down into two parts, fitted snugly in metal boxes and strapped to canvas and wooden backpacks. Each backpack weighed about thirty pounds. We carried them in addition to our regular gear. On long marches, we spelled each other in carrying the backpacks, but they sapped our strength, galled sores on our shoulders and backs. We hated them—with that intense hatred a man has for something he detests but can't do without.

I gave Harris a couple of dry-run practice sessions with the radio. He was, as I had expected, competent and quick. He knew artillery. If anything, he knew a bit too much. Like all men with technical training, he had complicated artillery firing with slide rules and geometry and Big T and Small T problems. He knew very little about direct-observation firing, as we did it.

It was the simple way, the quick way. It was also the best way since the artillery was behind us and firing over our heads.

The procedure was simple. We carried grid maps of the territory we crossed. Each map was crossed at intervals with horizontal and perpendicular lines called coordinates. One set of lines was marked with numbers; the other, with letters of the alphabet.

We used the junction of these coordinates as reference points to pinpoint a target.

Late one afternoon, I took Harris to the outskirts of the town and pointed to a small, riddled Jerry bunker about two hundred yards away. I handed him my map.

—Where is that?

He studied the map. —Coordinates S-3, sir.

—Not quite, I said.

He flushed and studied the map again. —Coordinates S-3 . . . fifty yards over . . . twenty yards right, sir.

—Check, I said. —Send it to Fire Direction Center. Ask for one howitzer, firing white phosphorus.

He looked surprised. —Now, sir?

—Now. We can afford it, I said.

He switched on the radio and relayed the fire mission. He was painstakingly correct in procedure and jargon. I watched him. He was some soldier.

The howitzers were already in position. In almost no time, we heard the soft swish of a shell overhead. The white phosphorus splattered a little to the left and a little to the rear of the bunker. We heard a soft rumble.

—What do you do now? I asked.

There was a slight flush on his cheeks and his eyes were bright.

—Ten yards right . . . thirty yards over, sir.

I grunted. He had a good eye. —Send it, I said.

He relayed the directions and less than a minute later another shell swished overhead. It hit directly in front of the door to the bunker, obscuring it in a cloud of white smoke.

—Nice shooting, I said. —Mission accomplished.

He sent the message, then took a deep breath and looked at the bunker and smiled.

—In our squad we send every mission that carefully, Harris, I said. —If you can't see where you're shooting, get up and move so you can see. We don't shoot blind from maps . . . not in this squad. Lay them down as carefully as if you're directing a blind man down steps. And remember this, Harris. Once you start keeping your head down in a nice, comfy hole and start shooting without watching, you're going to drop some short and kill your own men. Maybe we can spare the men, but that's just part of it. The bad thing is that it makes the rest of the outfit afraid of artillery. They won't advance as long as we're firing. Sometimes we have to drop them in pretty close. When that happens, we get up there and let them clip our ears, too. Get that, Harris?

—Yes, sir, he said.

We moved out of there one morning before daylight, cautiously. Jerry was close by. He still was fighting a delaying action. But he was full of cute tricks. He was also reckless with

men he didn't need any longer. They were slave troops mostly, Czechs and Poles and Ukrainians—men he had conquered and pressed into service. They were second-grade, underfed, dispirited, used to being cuffed about. He scattered them lavishly in his wake: a machine-gun nest here, a group of riflemen in a hollowed-out haystack there; a string of grenadiers in the ditches, clusters of automatic-weapon men in the woods. He knew they would throw down their weapons and surrender if he left them alone. So with every group he left one or two tough jack-booted noncoms. They were mean. I've seen men whose teeth they kicked out, men sprawled with the backs of their heads blown off with Lugers held at close range. I've heard men say they found slave troops chained to machine guns. I never saw that. But I do know weapons have no regard for their masters. They are just as lethal when fired by a slave as by a general.

As soon as it was light the 88's began coming in. They were fired spasmodically, inaccurately, so we knew they were on the move. Soon after we took our second break we hit a machine-gun nest. It was dug in on a low, wooded hill. I knocked it out with four rounds from the howitzers, using white-phosphorus shells because of the dense undergrowth.

We began to meet them fairly regularly after that. Three burp gunners in a culvert kept us pinned down for a while until a company outflanked them. Two machine guns dug in at a curve in the road held us up for twenty minutes until riflemen picked off the noncom and two gunners. When we filed past, the noncom was lying stretched out on his back on the side of the road, arms spread wide, like a child playing dead. A bloody figure was draped over the machine gun in a hole on one side of the road. From the hole on the other a foot stuck up, shoe untied. Two prisoners in filthy, baggy uniforms sat by the side of the road, greedily smearing tinned schmaltz on pieces of brown bread. They didn't look up at us. The schmaltz had probably belonged to the noncom.

I had been keeping an eye on Harris all morning. I looked at his face when we passed the noncom. He turned his head to look at him with interest.

He fired his first shots half an hour later. We had approached within seventy-five yards of a small farmhouse near the road

when a ragged volley poured from the windows. I saw two men knocked sprawling as I dived for the road. I nodded to Sergeant Rogers and we crawled up alongside the colonel. But the situation was already in hand. Our point had turned back and was advancing on the house from the rear. There was a long burst from a tommy gun, then another. The firing from the house stopped. Two men on bicycles shot out from behind the house, pedaling furiously toward the road. The noncoms were leaving. Somebody began firing at my side. It was Harris. He had risen to one knee, cheeks flushed. He was firing eagerly toward the men, too eagerly. I let him fire. A tall soldier stepped from behind the house and deliberately, almost casually, bowled the men off their bicycles with one sweeping burst from his tommy gun.

It was late afternoon when we met the main body. We were hot and exhausted and so dusty that we had dabs of mud at the corners of our eyes and mouths. On a hill about three hundred yards away there was a building with shuttered windows. It wasn't a house and since it didn't have a cross on top, it had to be a school. There was a small wooded patch to one side of it. Between the trees and the road was broad vineyard. It was luxuriant and well-tended, with the vines covering wires stretched between steel poles.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Small-arms fire from the woods grew so intense that it became a steady chattering. Bullets snapped past our faces and went whining off the road. Almost as a man, we dashed into the vineyard. Bullets cut leaves and splattered clusters of half-ripe grapes all around us. I looked up and saw a green-gray mass moving down from the woods and into the vineyard with us. There was a half-regiment of them at least. The whole side of the hill was alive with them. I turned to shout and saw that Harris was standing a few feet from me. He was watching the stream of men, too. He stood transfixed, with that bewildered, almost uncomprehending look men get when they meet the enemy face to face for the first time.

He looked the way I felt, and must have looked, the first time it happened to me. I knew he was thinking the same thing. —*What am I doing here anyway? What am I doing here, a full-grown man, standing in a field with a carbine in my hand, ready*

to kill somebody or be killed? If they want this field, let them have it. I don't want it. I never knew it existed until now.

But then the 88's started screaming in, close by and zeroed in, finding men almost every time they landed. The small-arms fire was deadly. I heard a long shrill scream.

—My eyes! Oh, God, my eyes.

I got the feeling I knew so well then. Cold, withdrawn, as if my real self were standing off, slightly withdrawn from my body. It always surprised me to see how slowly, but how competently, it reacted.

—Get those men up! Get those men up! I heard the colonel shouting. —Get 'em up closer!

The old familiar drill. All around me men were on the ground, trying to dig holes with their bodies. Anything to escape the screaming 88's and the bullets.

It was the time when officers and noncoms earned their pay. Harris was at a half-crouch. I slapped his shoulder roughly.

—Let's go!

He followed me as I made my way forward.

A kid was lying stretched out, hands across back of neck, carbine forgotten. He was one of the new ones.

—Get up! Up!

He looked at me blankly. I kicked him, hard. I doubt if he felt it, know he didn't remember it later.

—Up, soldier!

The kick had galvanized him. He picked up his carbine and ran forward.

Two men close together, snuggled almost atop one another. Old hands, good men, their eyes wary, faces tight.

—Up! You guys!

—Oh, hell! one of them muttered, but they stood up and went dashing forward.

All the way through the vines, shouting, cursing, kicking.

—Up! Get moving, soldier! Walking around the gray-faced ones with staring eyes. Not saying anything to the bloody ones, holding themselves bewilderedly.

The colonel was still shouting.

—Get those men moving! Get them up to that hill!

I reached him. His skin was tight on his face, making his

jaw muscles stand out. But he was competent as always, deadlly calm.

—Stay close, Sam, he said.

Raising his voice, he shouted, —Get 'em moving!

We were moving forward in a solid line now, shaking and tearing the whole vineyard. The grapes would not be good. Only dimly I heard small arms popping, 88's screaming, men screaming, cursing, grunting.

There was one! I didn't hear my carbine as I fired it. There was another one! Another!

—*Forward. Always move forward, stiff-legged. Shoot. Take your time. Now! Now! Now! Load it, load it, you fool! It's empty, you fool.*

Something clutched my boot. It was a Jerry, blood drenching his collar. —*Kick him; kick him loose, the filthy bastard. Keep firing! Keep firing! Watch the colonel. Don't lose sight of the colonel.*

They were streaming back up the hill now. Running. Not bothering to look back. —*Keep firing! Keep firing . . . no, hold it! Those are your men.*

—Hold it, you guys! I shouted. —Hold it! Hold it, you crazy bastard! Didn't you hear me say hold it! I knocked a man's carbine down.

The colonel was standing at the end of the vineyard, watching his men pour up the hill. We had defilade. The 88's were plowing into the empty vineyard behind us. No, it wasn't quite empty. A shrill voice called, —Medics! Medics!

The colonel, rubbing his chin: —Wish we could put some fire on those 88's, Sam. Maybe you'd better spray that ridge up there, anyway.

I turned. Britt Harris and Sergeant Rogers were already slipping off the backpacks with the radio. Britt looked pale but alert. I wanted to say something to let him know I thought he had done well. I helped him with the backpack.

—Not so bad, eh? I said.

He smiled slightly.

—No, sir. Not so bad.

—Take care of the prisoners, Lieutenant.

—Yes, sir.

Always my job. The penalty for inventing the little game when I was a sergeant.

The prisoners were on the hill, herded together by six bored riflemen. There were sixteen of them. Not supermen. Not killers now. Sad sacks, smelly in filthy, baggy gray-green uniforms. Some of them looked frightened, others defiant.

—*Achtung!* I barked.

They braced themselves. Not a very impressive group. I walked along the line slowly, looking coldly into each face. I strode to a position facing them.

—Corporal!

—Yes, sir! The wiry German-speaking corporal approached and saluted smartly.

—Tell the prisoners to empty their pockets. They are to keep their army identification cards. I want everything else except the linings. Everything!

—Yes, sir! Another salute, a smart about-face.

—*Achtung!* the corporal snapped. There was a stream of guttural German.

The untidy line stirred uneasily. Slowly the prisoners reached in their pockets and began to throw personal belongings to the ground. Combs. Ration cards. Letters. Dirty handkerchiefs. Hunks of brown bread.

I waited, stern-faced, until they had finished.

I spoke harshly. —Warn them I want everything, Corporal!

—*Der Leutnant warnt dass Sie müssen alles auswerfen . . . alles*, barked the corporal.

I eyed the line coldly until some of the men began to shift uneasily.

—Now we begin the search, I said.

—*Jetzt fangen wir die Suche an*, the corporal echoed.

I marched stiffly around behind the line. The corporal followed me. He caught my eye and grinned broadly. I nodded. He grabbed the greasy collar of the prisoner before us.

—This man has kept pictures! I roared indignantly.

—*Dieser Mann hat Bilder behalten!* roared the corporal.

—Shoot him! I bellowed.

—*Schiessen Sie!* bellowed the corporal

I had already removed my pistol from my holster. I fired it into the ground. The corporal yanked the prisoner back-

ward to the ground. I caught a glimpse of his beseeching eyes. The corporal clamped his hand over the frightened man's mouth just in time to stop a scream.

There was a horrified gasp from the line of prisoners. Then feverish activity as they began to empty their pockets. There was a rich haul this time. Dozens of pictures. Shoe-horns. Razor blades. More letters. A nail file. Several Bibles. And even a nasty Storm Trooper dirk.

It took only a few seconds.

The corporal released the frightened prisoner and roared with laughter. The riflemen howled. The prisoners looked around startled. When they saw the prisoner standing unharmed, a little indignant now, brushing the dust off his clothes, a few of them laughed. All looked sheepish.

—Take them away, I said.

The corporal barked orders. The prisoners slouched away.

The pudgy Jerry who had been manhandled brought up the rear. Every few steps he paused and shook his legs self-consciously. He had wet his pants.

THREE

I will go back to Italy again
Someday.

I want to walk the streets of Naples

Without being besieged

By ragged little urchins,

Tugging my clothes and begging,

—*Caramella*, Joe

—*Cigaretta*, Joe

—You wants my sister, Joe; shesa nice girl.

I want to go back to St. Peter's in Rome

And raise my eyes slowly

And again stand in gasping admiration

Under that incredible dome.

I want to go to Frascati
And drink clear, mellow wine
In the cool cavelike taverns,
Lined with immense old casks,
And know that there are no stinking dead
Buried in rubble outside.

But never again,
No matter how long I live,
Will I visit that strip of land
Between Civitavecchia and Pisa
Along the Tyrrhenian Sea.
I am told that it is a rich region;
That wheat stands as high as a man's waist,
That the hillsides grow grapes and olives
As good as any produced anywhere.
It should be fertile land.
The fields and the hills drank our blood.

It was not a campaign for history books.
You'll find scarcely a mention of it
Anywhere.

There were no big battles;
The generals were not worried.
Jerry was still on the run.
But once again he moved as he pleased
And had command of the terrain.
Every few miles there was a mountain ridge
Where he could dig in
And line up his long-barreled 88's,
Waiting
For us to come forward
Crawling
On the flat lands below.

What is an 88 projectile like?
It's a smallish, sleek and shiny thing,
Only an oversized bullet,
Really.
It weighs only a few pounds.
But when it leaves its long, rifled barrel
Screaming

Like a mad woman
Filled with hate,
It seems to grow and grow
Until it reaches the size of—well,
An old-fashioned kitchen range,
White-hot.
It travels in a straight line
Like a rifle bullet,
But so swiftly, so damnably swiftly,
That, sometimes,
The report of the gun
And the burst of the shell
Blend in one sound.
Jagged, searing shrapnel buzzes
Like angry hornets (and this is not a poetic phrase),
And, sometimes,
As long as ten seconds after a shell has burst,
A piece will search you out,
And strike you dead.

Sometimes we knew when to expect them. When we rounded a mountain pass, or crossed an open field, or splashed through a stream, they always came screaming down. Often we lay for as long as five hours while they methodically pounded us to pieces. It was worse when they caught us by surprise, behind a hill or in a ravine or in the streets of a town, when we thought we were protected. In one single barrage we lost half a company. A panicky captain deployed it in a woods. The screaming shells burst in the treetops and showered down like deadly hail.

They were capricious, unpredictable. I saw the body of a major sitting upright in a jeep. It had no head. An 88 had snatched it off as it howled past. A sergeant in one of the tanks supporting us was leaning out of the turret when an 88 sliced open his belly as neatly as a surgeon's scalpel. It left him holding his warm, uninjured guts in both hands.

We dug in. But once men found safety in holes, it was almost impossible to get them moving again. The generals became dissatisfied with our progress. Orders came through to dig in only at night. We went faster after that, but we had

a casualty for every quarter-mile. As days turned to weeks, not all of our casualties were hit. We watched for men who grinned foolishly and sauntered nonchalantly along when 88's screamed, or for those who stiffened wide-eyed and had to be pried loose from sides of ditches. We were weary and dispirited. Almost half the outfit was replacements. We had lost much of our competence as well as confidence. We had been within the sound of shellfire for ninety-seven days.

Finally they gave us some relief. Another outfit was sent forward to reinforce us as shock troops. We would move forward for four days, then remain in place while they plodded past us. After another four days, we would plow the way ahead of them.

This slow leap-frogging had gone on for several weeks when one night vehicles began rumbling forward through the little town where we were billeted. We went out half-dressed and stood silently with the *paesanos* while they passed. Many of them were ambulances, but there were also six-by-six's, weapons carriers and even staff cars.

—Something big's broken loose, Britt said.

I nodded.

We sat and wondered what had happened for a couple of hours before the vehicles returned. One of the first in line was an open weapons carrier. It slowed up for a truck ahead as it drew abreast of us. We saw that it was stacked high with bodies in mattress covers. Casually perched atop the bodies, clutching his rifle loosely, was a small, thin soldier.

—What's happened, fellow? Britt called.

We saw then that he was a Section Eight case. He began skipping about on the bodies like a lively monkey. He drew his bottom lip in and made a whistling sound and made waving motions with his outstretched hand. His voice was shrill.

—They're usin' real bullets! They're sure usin' real bullets!

He fell back and shook with laughter. We could hear him for a long time after the weapons carrier lurched forward. We stood silently until the other loaded vehicles had passed.

Half an hour later word was passed around for officers to report to headquarters immediately and to get ready to move out in two hours.

The command post was in a white-washed cellar. The colonel

looked tired and drawn. He waited silently until we were all there before he rose.

—They've cut them to pieces, he said. —At the moment, there aren't two full-strength companies between the main body and the enemy. And the enemy has been reinforced—by parachutists.

There was a murmur from the officers.

—That's right, the colonel said. —We're going to meet the big boys. He turned to the map.

—At 1600 their point hit this ridge—about three miles from here. It was defended by three machine guns and a platoon of riflemen—the usual slave troops with a sprinkling of noncoms. They took possession after half an hour. After running a recon and seeing nothing, they moved down into this valley in battle order. Jerry waited until they were boxed completely, then attacked from all four sides. He cut them to pieces with automatic weapons and small arms. He then withdrew in order.

—It was a clever move. Now he's waiting for us.

—How do we know they're troopers? someone asked.

—By the way they fight, the colonel said dryly. There was a low laugh. The colonel made an apologetic gesture.

—That's a good question, he said. —Intelligence has made positive identification from some of the dead. He turned to a nearby bench and unfolded a grayish-green garment which was a cross between a parka and a smock. —Most parachutists are easily identifiable because they wear one of these, he said. —It's a coverall to keep their gear from becoming entangled in their suspension lines when they jump. They also like to wear it on the ground.

He looked at his watch. —We will move out at 0430. You know what to expect.

We ran into the first detachment at 0900, dug in along a high embankment. They pinned us down for four hours before we were able to blast them out. There were no sad-sack prisoners now. We had to kill them all. As long as one man was able to lift a rifle, we were in danger. They never took a step backward.

They were uncannily clever. They carried razor-sharp knives in stainless-steel scabbards. These became coveted souvenirs. Men fought and bargained for them. Somehow they learned

about this. One day as we lay in a patch of woods firing across a small clearing at a suspected position on a hillside, one of them suddenly shouted, —*Kamerad!*

He stood up, looking like a great bat in his loose smock as he held his arms outstretched. Dangling from his right hand was one of the highly prized knives. He started advancing across the clearing. Half a platoon arose and dashed forward in their eagerness to get to him first. When they reached the clearing, he ducked and scurried back to the hillside. A dozen or so of his companions stood up with automatic weapons and cut the men in the clearing to pieces. I burned them out of their holes with white phosphorus.

They never asked for mercy. We never gave it to them. Somehow there is a notion that American troops are not brutal. Except, perhaps, for the Aussies, I do not know any troops who are so ruthless in actual combat. From hillside positions, I often stood and watched our troops scouring an area. Anything that moved, including, sometimes, rabbits, was riddled to pieces. When they approached buildings, they riddled them mercilessly, threw in hand grenades or knocked the door off with a bazooka, and then walked in. Anything still kicking was shot through the head. Then they emerged, sometimes carrying pictures or mirrors or cooking utensils, and moved on again.

Britt had become the most valuable man in the squad. He was always by my side, competent and quick. One day as we entered a town we were held behind a wall by a lone smock-clad figure with a burp gun in a church steeple. We could not use artillery to knock him out. Our men had already moved into the town from the flanks. Every time we stuck our heads around the wall, bullets splattered the other side.

—I'm getting out of here, Britt said suddenly.

He dashed forward while I watched in cold anxiety and reached another wall. Soon I heard his carbine peppering the Jerry from the other side. I stuck my head around the wall and got enough of a glimpse of the Jerry to send a bullet into the back of his head. It knocked his helmet off and sent him sprawling across the parapet.

Britt came up smiling.

—Nice shooting.

—Are you crazy or something? I asked.

—I saw he couldn't reach me, he said. —The trajectory was wrong. He would have had to stand on his tiptoes and lean over the wall.

I smiled. I was beginning to discover that he always had an angle.

I had acquired a candle. It was a valuable possession. At night when we holed up in some filthy shack or barn, we put shelter halves and blankets over the doors and windows and its dim light allowed us to write letters or play blackjack. I nursed it carefully and carried it in my carbine holster. On long marches, when I also carried my carbine in the holster, it was a tight fit. I had to ram the candle down tightly alongside the bolt.

It was near the end of a rare afternoon when we had marched through terrain where Jerry couldn't get at us with his 88's. We were hot and dusty, strung out along both sides of the road in battle order. The colonel was at the head of the column. I was plodding along at his heels. He stopped suddenly. Two men were approaching at a dead run. When they got closer we saw they were British officers, helmetless and wearing shorts and short-sleeved jackets. Their knees and arms were scratched and bleeding. One of them was tall and thin and wore the pips of a major. The other was short and his blond hair was long and flopped over one eye. He was a captain. We gaped at them in amazement. They stood fighting for breath before the major panted an introduction.

—Major Henley and Captain Balfour, psychological-warfare detachment.

The colonel smiled. We had run across these psychological-warfare teams before. They passed out small Union Jacks and sometimes, almost as soon as we had liberated a town, every *paesano* was waving one.

—Afraid we've struck a spot of trouble, the major said. —Ambushed by some bloody Krauts up ahead. Had to leave our jeep and make a dash for it. Deucedly awkward. One of your vehicles, y'know. Shouldn't like anything to happen to it.

The colonel looked at them dumfounded. Then he flushed with anger.

—Do you gentlemen realize that you've been in advance of the point?

The major looked surprised. —No. Wasn't aware of that. Well, bad show, very bad show. Must be off course, Norman.

The long-haired captain nodded. —Rather!

The colonel looked at them sternly a moment, then sighed, shook his head and grinned.

—All right, where is your jeep?

—About three hundred yards ahead, the major said. —Left it in the road. Right near a little wood. Had to make a dash for it. Place is alive with bloody Kraut.

—Rather! said the captain.

We were surrounded by grinning officers and men. The colonel turned to a platoon leader. —Tom, take your men and run a recon on those woods. Knock them out if you can. If you need more help, send back for it.

He spoke to me. —You'd better go along with them, Sam. You may be able to put some fire in there.

As we started up the road, the major called out, —I say, you'll be careful of the jeep, won't you? One of yours, y'know. Shouldn't like anything to happen to it.

One of the men said, —Don't worry, mister. We'll save your flags for you, too.

We grinned.

As we walked along, I took my carbine out of its holster, noticed that the bolt was heavily smeared with wax from the candle. I wiped it off with my hand, unfolded the tubular-steel stock, pulled the bolt slightly to be sure it was loaded. Bits of wax had also worked down into the chamber. I flicked them out with my finger.

The jeep was where the major had said it would be. It was riddled, in the middle of the road, sitting forlorn and lopsided on three flattened tires. To the right was a pine thicket, narrowing down to a point at the end closest to us.

I spoke to the platoon leader. —I'll work in at that point so the batteries will be at our back. If you have any trouble, I'll blast them for you.

I motioned to my squad and we swung toward the point of the woods. The platoon was already scattering out, crouching low. They were within a hundred yards when the first

ragged volley rang out. There weren't many Jerries, rifles mostly with a couple of machine pistols. The men in the platoon held their fire, worked closer to the thicket, spread out wide enough now to envelop it. There was a small ditch about fifteen yards from the point of the woods.

—Put your radio up here, Harris, I said. I turned to the riflemen. —You men stay with him. Rogers and I will go up and see what it looks like.

On the other side of the ditch I crouched low and made for the point. Sergeant Rogers was right behind me. Afternoon shadows lay thick under the pines. The platoon had opened fire. It increased in intensity as it advanced. Jerry seemed to be concentrated in the thickest part of the woods. Our end seemed deserted and empty. I dropped to my belly and started inching forward. I could hear Rogers doing the same. I had almost reached the first line of trees when they opened up. Bullets snapped about my head and churned up the ground about me. They weren't more than twenty yards away. There were at least six of them.

I heard Rogers grunt; then he said quietly, matter-of-factly, —They got me that time.

I looked back at him. He was lying flat on his belly, head raised slightly, face twisted in a straining grimace.

—Put your head down! I snapped.

There was another burst from the woods. I still couldn't see any movement in the shadows, but I raised my carbine to spray them. It snapped. It had happened before, not often, but occasionally. I ejected the shell and pulled the trigger. It snapped again.

There was another burst from the woods. It sounded closer. Out of the corner of my eye, almost like a flickering shadow, I saw two Jerries rise, dash forward, then hit the ground again. I threw another shell into the chamber and fired toward them. It was no use. There was another click.

Scarcely hearing the bullets snapping overhead and spraying the ground about me, I pulled open the bolt and looked in the chamber. Tallow from the candle had sifted in. The little depression in the end of the bolt was caked with it, burying the firing pin. I worked frantically but the tip of my finger packed the tallow harder. I looked for a twig but

couldn't find one. I raised myself slightly to reach for the box of matches in my pocket. It was a mistake. Bullets snapped all around me.

I started sliding backward toward Rogers to get his carbine. Something hit the ground and bounced ten feet in front of me. I shifted my eyes, then froze. It was a hand grenade—a small black cylinder, potato-masher type, with the wooden handle removed. I looked at it almost curiously. I had never had a hand grenade thrown at me before. I recovered in time to drive my face into the ground just before it went off with a dull plop.

The Jerries were close, too close. I heard the underbrush rustle. Another grenade went off. It had fallen ten or twelve feet to my right. I started slipping back toward Rogers again, desperately.

I froze again. Three shells whistled overhead, low and close together. It was a long, startled second before I realized they were ours. They were followed by more, coming in too fast to count. They began pounding into the woods. I heard running feet. I didn't dare raise my head until the woods began to rock with the volley. It was beautifully fired. It started at the far edge of the woods and worked forward slowly, giving our men a chance to withdraw.

I slipped back to Rogers. There was a nasty blue-rimmed, blood-filled hole below his right collarbone. The bullet had plowed downward. He was pale and his freckles stood out darkly. He managed a weak smile, but I knew he was hard hit.

—Medics! Medics! I shouted.

They were putting Rogers on a stretcher when Britt and the other men came up. —Who did that firing? I asked.

Britt hesitated. —I did. I . . .

—Nice work, I said. —Real nice work!

The next day I got Britt alone.

—We've got to get somebody to take Rogers' place. The job is yours if you want it. You earned it yesterday.

—I want it, he said quickly.

I smiled at him.

—Good. Then we're even-steven. I've been meaning to give

you back those stripes I yanked. Now you've got an extra one to boot.

He smiled back.

—Onward and upward, that's me, Lieutenant.

—Okay, then, it's a deal. I've sworn off candles for life.

To replace Britt as radio operator, I drew a slim Alabama kid named Anderson. He was young. Cheerful. Trying manfully to cultivate a goatee on his almost beardless chin. He had come in with the same group of replacements as Britt. He showed up with his gear the next morning, beaming, —Hiya, Loot.

I introduced him to the other men.

—Aw, I know Britt, he said. —We almost got our tails blown off together—didn't we, Britt?

Britt nodded and didn't say anything. I saw a slight flush on his cheeks.

—How's that? I asked.

—Aw, it was when we first joined up with the outfit. The time when those guys went out and got blowed to hell in that mine field. Me'n Britt had been out there just a little before dark to get a helmetful of apples. We didn't see no mines, did we, Britt?

Britt still hadn't spoken. The flush on his cheeks had deepened. He didn't look at me.

I said, —Yeah, I remember that.

That night I sat next to him while we had chow. —You're a smooth operator, Sergeant Harris. A real smooth operator. He looked up quickly but relaxed when he saw my face.

—So you'd already been out in that orchard? You knew a way through those mines?

He shrugged.

—I wasn't sure.

—I should have known you wouldn't have pulled such a bonehead trick unless you had an angle.

He didn't say anything.

—Why in hell didn't you tell me? Maybe you wouldn't have lost your stripes. I grinned. —On the other hand, maybe you wouldn't have been such a hero either.

He smiled. —I didn't notice anybody thought I was a hero.

I shook my head.

—You're a slick one, a real slick one. Everytime I get you zeroed in, I have to figure out another bracket.

His eyes searched my face before he grinned sheepishly.

He was a good sergeant. Command doesn't come easily to some men, even when they have all the other qualities necessary for leadership. Some staff generals are sad sacks in the field. He gave orders quickly and easily, and—like a soldier.

—Tell those stupid jerks to get behind that hill, I would growl.

He would shout, —You men there, get defilade!

He had an unerring eye for terrain. Partly this was due to his military training, but mostly, he told me once, because he did so much upland quail hunting in civilian life. He almost never mentioned civilian life or his family, but he wrote letters regularly. At every mail call there were always letters from his family—on heavy cream-colored embossed stationery. He showed me a snapshot of his mother and two sisters once. It could have gone right into a slick society magazine. They were smiling, chic, self-assured, standing on the lawn in front of an immense house with tall white columns. Two bird dogs were crouched at their feet. I made a proper comment and gave him back the snapshot.

—That little sharecropper's shack . . . is that yours, too? I asked.

He smiled and nodded.

He received packages regularly. He always insisted on sharing them with the rest of us. He was not on close terms with the other men in the squad. He never unbent entirely, but they accepted him. More importantly, they obeyed him without question. He was an amazingly good forager. Whenever we found a peasant who still had a few rabbits or chickens, we always sent him to make a deal. He seldom failed. Sometimes he wheedled or bargained threadbare housewives into cooking us a meal of their meager and precious supply of pasta. He had a way with women. He could turn his charm on and off as easily as turning a spigot.

I began to depend on him more and more. He was always

militarily correct, formally so, even when I gave him a chance to be otherwise. But we understood each other and worked together easily. He was a good soldier. He always had an angle.

FOUR

Every soldier who has seen action
Has a close one to talk about.
About a shell
That was a dud and landed a few feet away;
Or a bullet
That was deflected by a rock, or knocked
His rifle from his hands.
But I sometimes worried about the close ones
I sensed, but didn't see;
The prickly feeling I had up and down my back
When I walked cautiously through blasted streets,
Waiting
For a sniper's bullet that never came;
Or marched with tightened guts, toward a mountain,
Where an artillery observer had marked me in his glasses
As a target
For a shell never fired.
Nobody is ever able to explain the close ones:
The ones that missed,
Or the ones that were never fired—
Unless it was God's work.
Yes, God.
But if that is so,
Why did he save us, and not the other men?

It was early morning. We were moving forward, abreast, stretched out over a mile of slightly rolling countryside. Britt was on my left, Anderson on my right. We crossed a beaten footpath, strewn with goat droppings. On one side there was a shallow ditch and then an open field; on the other, a small

hill serried with low erosion fences of gray stone. We fell into single file for a few paces and then—*whap!* a bullet bored into the ground a foot away. Anderson snatched back his hand.

I shifted my position against the side of the ditch and slowly turned my head. They were both glued against the side of the ditch, breathing through their mouths, eyes watchful.

—Where is he? I whispered.

They shook their heads.

Maybe it was just a lucky shot. Slowly, by inches, I moved my foot away from the side of the ditch. *Whap!* It was closer this time. Six inches from my toe. I heard the flat report. It was close by but I couldn't tell the direction. Britt nudged my foot with his helmet. I looked back at him. He motioned with his eyes toward the low hill on our right. I nodded and lay back.

Anderson hissed. Britt and I slowly turned our heads. He had found a short stick, a crooked fragment of root. He reached it out and jabbed his helmet. It plodded over, smooth surface upward. *Zinnggg!* The bullet cut four strands of the camouflage netting on the helmet as neatly as a knife and left a barely perceptible groove in the helmet.

We were trapped. Boxed. Across the field, in the middle distance, I heard the soft chatter of a burp gun, rifle shots, shouts. I could feel sweat trickling from my armpits and down my sides. My mind was racing furiously. I studied the faint groove across the helmet. It was at a right angle to me. That meant the sniper was directly opposite us, probably behind the last stone fence on the hill.

I raised my head cautiously. *Whap!*

It was close, so close I could feel it suck air as it passed. I pressed against the rough side of the ditch and listened to my breathing.

I could feel my legs growing numb. Cautiously, laboriously, pressing against the side of the ditch, I turned on my back. I pressed my carbine flat against my chest. I looked at Britt and Anderson over my boot tips.

—I'm going to move, I whispered.

Using elbows and heels, being careful to keep my knees below the rim of the ditch, I began pushing my way up the ditch. It was hard work. My web equipment kept snagging roots and rocks. I winced as my canteen pounded a bruise on

my hip. After a half-dozen yards, I was exhausted. Sweat was burning my eyes and my throat was dry and raspy. I pushed myself backward, trying not to grunt too loudly.

Suddenly, frighteningly, I discovered there was no protecting cover on my left side. I turned sharply. I was at the end of a shallow gully that ran up to the top of the hill. Running alongside it was the footpath which had been parallel to the ditch.

I estimated I was at least twenty yards from Britt and Anderson. There was no time for caution now. I turned over, drew my legs under me and, panting, stumbling, bruising my hands and knees on the rocks, clambered up the gully. At the top, almost blinded by sweat and exhaustion, I slipped the safety catch on my carbine and ducked behind the three-foot high stone wall. I could see along its entire length. There was nobody there.

I lay low and caught my breath, then, carbine ready, peered over the wall. For the time it takes to draw a breath, I stood stock-still with surprise. He was not where I expected him to be. He was directly below me, two fences away. He was seated with his legs drawn up, rifle across his lap, helmeted head bowed and resting on the fence.

My first shot made him sit bolt upright. The second slammed him against the fence. He stayed there a moment, then fell to his right side.

I went down to him. He had been there a long time. Empty ration tins were scattered about. He had used the side of the wall as a latrine. A crucifix lay at his finger tips.

I was standing, looking over the wall, when Britt and Anderson came up. Britt took in the terrain with a practiced eye.

—Why in hell didn't he kill you when you came up that gully?

I felt that cold feeling in my belly that was almost nausea.

—I don't know, I said.

I have never forgotten his face.

The farther we went, the thicker they became. Some days we moved six miles, some days only a hundred yards. A few days we didn't advance at all. They were stubborn, incredibly brave. We had to blast our path through them. As long as one remnant held on, we were in danger.

One afternoon we ran headlong into a heavy detachment in a pine grove. We fanned out, ate dirt, while they leveled a murderous fusillade. A platoon which moved forward to flank them was shot to pieces. I saw one BAR man stagger backwards as he took one in the chest. He regained his balance, and some involuntary prompting caused him to stand stiffly at attention, do a perfect about-face and take three measured steps before he fell to his face. The colonel crawled to me and pointed to a small, whitewashed house in a nearby grove.

—Set up an observation post there. I'll join you and we'll blast them out.

I motioned to Britt and we started crawling backwards. We reached a slight rise which offered some defilade. I got to my feet and, stooping low, ran for the building. My carbine was hanging from my right shoulder. I dashed around the corner of the small building—and pulled up short.

Standing ten feet away, just outside the doorway, facing me with rifle on ready was a Jerry. He was hard and fit. His grayish-green smock was almost new. There was not a flicker of surprise on his dark, handsome face when he saw me. I fumbled for my carbine just as he fired. I felt the bullet pull my jump jacket, rake my flesh like a sharp piece of ice. In the instant that it took, I knew I wasn't hit solidly.

I fell to one knee, still fumbling with my carbine. I saw every quick move he made with frightening clarity, the veins in his muscular wrists, the dirt under his fingernails. The barrel of his rifle lowered to cover my chest. I braced myself, winced as I heard the shot. Surprisingly, I didn't feel anything. He staggered and there was a look of almost ludicrous amazement on his face. He looked down at his chest, made a grimace and fell heavily.

I looked at him in astonishment. It was several seconds before I realized Britt was standing above me and it was his shot I had heard. He raised his carbine and carefully pumped another bullet into the fallen Jerry. —Are you hit, Lieutenant?

I was still gazing wonderingly at the Jerry. Blood was staining the front of his smock.

—I ain't missed, boy, I said slowly.

Then I felt relief flood every fiber, tingle my finger tips. I knew I wasn't hit badly. I grinned at Britt. His face was

strained, anxious. He ran to the door, stuck his head in cautiously and looked around, then came back and tore open my jump jacket. I still was grinning at him, lying back, glowing in the warm feeling of relief.

—You're some soldier there, boy, I said. —Yes, sir, you're really a sharp guy.

He was doing something to my right arm, making it hurt. I looked down and saw an ooze of blood. I looked away.

—You're quite a guy, I said. —Quite a guy.

He smiled slightly. —Does it pain much, Lieutenant?

My shoulder was burning. —You can call me Sam, I said. —From now on, we're real good friends. Just call me Sam.

—It's not very bad, he said.

I looked down then. There was a bluish groove across my arm and across my side almost in the armpit. It was oozing blood slowly, almost reluctantly. I grinned at him and he grinned back.

—You're my pal, boy, I said. —Is there anything I've got, you want? He laughed.

I could have kissed him. Instead I thought of an old vaudeville joke. I grasped his hand.

—Tell me, I asked anxiously, will I be able to play the piano now?

He looked at the wound again, closely. —Oh, sure, he said soothingly, —you'll be able to play the piano.

I grinned. —That's funny, I can't play the piano now.

We were still laughing uproariously, much more than the tired old joke deserved, when other men arrived.

They sent me to a tent hospital, a sprawling, busy place. Minor wounds such as mine got brief, almost casual attention. In the operating tent where they dressed my wound, there were six operating tables lined up side by side, going full blast. Surgeons in blood-stained gowns with their masks dangling loosely about their chins worked over some of them. At others, doctors or technicians, stripped to the waist, applied plaster casts to unconscious men. One man, pale and blue-lipped, lay supported by steel uprights at his head, heels and rump while they wrapped him completely in plaster-soaked bandages.

That stuck in my mind—that, and three other things.

One was a short, dark lieutenant in my ward who jumped off his bed periodically and looked around wildly and pointed his finger and went *Bang! Bang! Bang!* as if he were a small boy playing cops and robbers. His name was Willie and nobody paid any attention to him.

Another thing I remember was a pale, balding captain in the bed next to mine. Every few hours a ward boy came in and either gave him an enema or made him swallow a rubber tube with a small metal ball at the end. The captain never spoke to me. He lay silently, looking up at the canvas roof, and his forehead was always beaded with sweat. He seemed to be extremely ill.

Once while he was retching and gagging to get the rubber tube down, I asked the ward boy, —What's his trouble?

He grinned contemptuously at the straining man. —He's buckin' to get out. But he ain't gonna make it. He'll be glad to get a bullet afore we get through with him.

The other thing I remember is the day a cocky ward boy came through wheeling a cart covered with small boxes. He stopped at the foot of my bed.

—Lieutenant Loggins?

—Yeah.

—Where did you get hit, Lieutenant?

—Under the arm.

—Not the anatomical location, Lieutenant, just the geographical location.

—I don't know.

He sighed and made a notation on a sheet of paper and threw one of the boxes on the bed.

—There you are, Lieutenant.

—What is it?

—It's the Purple Heart, Lieutenant—and don't say you'd rather have an aspirin, because we're fresh out, fresh out.

After a week, my wound was healing rapidly. I began to chafe and wonder when I would be released. Two days later a lieutenant from A Company was admitted with a bullet in his calf and said the outfit had been withdrawn from the line and was on the way back to Rome to prepare for a jump.

I waited another day and went to the doctor in charge of the ward.

—I'd like to get out of here, Doc. I'd like to get back to my outfit.

He pulled my bathrobe back and gave my arm a casual glance. —Well, why don't you take off?

—Just like that?

He nodded. —Just like that.

—Thanks, Doc, I said.

He nodded. —Next time use a razor to shave under your arm. It's more hygienic.

I found the outfit at Frascati, bivouacked in an olive grove. Britt was the first member of the squad I saw. He grinned and we shook hands.

—How are you, Lieutenant?

—Sam to you, I said.

He laughed. —Well, how are you, Sam?

—I'm fine, I said. —Let's get this show on the road.

FIVE

There are times—
But not many—
When a man stands alone.
Stripped,
Naked
Of all, except courage.

Not the matador's famed Moment of Truth.
A man is not alone when he hears
Cheers,
Applause.
To some men the crowd's roar
Is priceless.
They desire it
More than love,
Money,
Or life itself.

But a man is alone,
Dismally alone,
When he steps from a plane
And falls in darkness.
Solitary,
Knowing
If he dies
No one,
Except himself—
And possibly God—
Will be aware of how brave
He really was.

There was a major named—but his name doesn't matter. He was a demolition expert. As he stood hooked up in the door of one of the bucking planes, he had twenty feet of primer cord tightly wrapped around his body from hips to armpits. He was loaded with forty pounds of high explosives. Incredibly, a heavy tracer bullet hit him squarely in the chest. He was knocked backward with the primer cord smoldering. A quick-witted sergeant kicked him out into the darkness. We all heard the loud bang and saw the bright flash as the major exploded like a gigantic firecracker. Some men floating down about him found his blood and bits of his flesh on their gear for days afterward.

The planes had gone high to avoid Jerry's ack-ack. We were at twelve hundred feet when we got the green light.

Most of us had never jumped that high before. We seemed to hang there for an eternity. From above, tracer bullets seemed to approach almost lazily until they popped past through our suspension lines. It was pitch-dark with a predawn mist hovering a few feet above the ground. I landed surprisingly easy, but as, automatically, I went into a forward somersault, I heard a crashing in the bushes around me. I snatched my trench knife from my boot and held it blade upward against my chest and listened.

While a parachutist lies on the ground in his tight harness he is almost completely defenseless. A quick child could cut his throat with a knife or an old man could pin him to the ground with a pitchfork.

The planes had already droned away by the time I cut myself loose from my harness and stood up with my carbine on, ready. Again I heard the thrashing through the bushes, closer at hand.

—Liberty! I whispered.

There was no reply. A dark form appeared through the bushes fifteen feet away.

—Liberty! I said again. There was a pause and my finger was tightening on the trigger when I heard Britt's soft voice.

—Lafayette.

—You idiot, I said. —I almost shot you.

His low whisper was worried. —I've lost my socks.

The incongruity of it and my relief made me laugh.

—What socks?

—I was carrying my socks in my hip pocket and the opening shock must have jarred them loose.

—Well, forget your socks, I laughed, —I'll give you a pair of mine.

It was quiet, too quiet. Jerry knew we were on the ground now and he had stopped shooting. He was waiting for us to show ourselves. We peered around in the darkness, trying to get our bearings. Our drop area was supposed to have been a vineyard. We were standing in an uncultivated field covered with underbrush. It was obvious we were off course, but we tried to find some landmark, some terrain feature, which coincided with the sand table and map we had memorized in pre-jump briefings.

—Well, where do we go from here? Britt asked.

—Start walking, I guess, I said.

It was comforting to have him by my side as we walked across the field, carbines and eyes sweeping the darkness. We didn't hear or see any of the other men in our stick. We heard only one sound. About two hundred yards to our left, a vehicle suddenly roared to life and crunched away. It sounded like a half-track.

—Antiparachute patrol, Britt whispered.

I nodded.

After five minutes we approached a narrow dirt road and began skirting it. I stopped quickly. Against an embankment beside the road a short distance ahead was a cluster of about

a dozen men. We crouched and watched them until I caught the sound of low voices.—They're ours, I said with relief.

We relaxed and walked to them. —What are you men doing here in the road? I asked sharply.

—We got a *paesano* here, Lieutenant, said one of the men.

—He ain't a *paesano*, ya jerk, said another indignantly,—he's a frog!

He put out his hand toward a dark figure huddled beside the embankment. —Parley voo, boy, he said, —parley voo.

A small Frenchman cowered against the bank, whimpering and rolling his eyes with fright. An overturned bicycle lay at his feet. I leaned toward him, and he drew in his breath in a screeching sound and pushed his trembling body closer to the bank. I drew back. The stench was overpowering. He had dirtied himself thoroughly.

—Me and Jim saw him first, said one of the men. —We got our suspension lines tangled and hit on the road together right in front of him. He yelped and drove his bicycle right into the bank and he ain't moved since.

I smiled. It must have been a shock to the small Frenchman to have been riding down a deserted road and suddenly have two blackened-face figures come tumbling down in front of him.

—Let me try him, said Britt.

He leaned forward and began to talk to the man soothingly in French. The Frenchman rolled his eyes and pushed closer to the bank at first, but after a while he began to relax. He shook his head dazedly and sat up, still trembling but almost recovered.

—You throw French around pretty well, I said to Britt.

He grinned. —Just another one of my many accomplishments.

He talked to the Frenchman some more. Finally the man grunted something, then something else. After a few minutes the dam broke, and he chattered away in an unbroken stream, waving his arms wildly and lifting his eyes upward. He continued to rattle away as Britt turned to me and laughed.

—He said he spent the night with a woman whose husband was away. He was going home and he must have had a guilty conscience because he says he thought the men were devils who had come to get him.

Everyone laughed, too loudly.

—Knock it off, I said. I turned to Britt. —Ask him if there are many Jerries around and find out how far we are from the château in our drop area.

The little man was almost cocky now. He rattled away, making emphatic gestures.

Britt turned. —The Jerries have been moving about the last few days. He doesn't know how many are around here. The château is seven kilometers from here.

—Tell him to take us there and keep away from the Jerries, I said.

Britt spoke and the man shook his head wildly.

—*Non, non!* he repeated over and over again.

—We're not asking him, we're telling him, I said.

Britt spoke to him sharply. The little man shrugged resignedly and stood up. He muttered something.

Britt grinned. —He says it's retribution.

Dawn was beginning to lighten the sky as we set out down the dusty road behind the little Frenchman, who was pushing his bicycle. As we walked along, men filtered out of the woods and fields to join us. Within half an hour there were about thirty of us, almost three planeloads, some carrying tommy guns and bazookas. There were even two pairs of machine gunners, pulling their weapons on small carts. A number of men were limping with sprained ankles. A couple had broken their legs and were hobbling along, supported by their buddies. One white-faced captain had a bullet hole through the fleshy part of his thigh. From time to time we saw men who had not been so lucky. There were three bodies piled almost on top of each other in one small culvert. They had been riddled by automatic weapons. In the distant woods we occasionally spotted bodies hanging from trees by suspension lines. At a junction of three roads, a dead trooper hung from a power line. His canopy was draped over one side of the wires, billowing just enough to hold him as he swung gently on the other side. We stopped and cut him down and laid him in a ditch. He was tall and blond. The right side of his face was missing. Two signalmen also climbed a pole and cut the power line. It parted with a brilliant blue flash.

The sun was peering above the horizon when we hit Jerry

for the first time. He was behind a roadblock in a slight depression in the woods. We scattered for the ditches when he opened fire. The small Frenchman stood bewilderedly a moment before he followed us, slithering on top of a slim Southern kid. I heard his indignant yelp.

—Git! Git outta heah, you wabble-jawed polecat!

There were eighteen of them behind the roadblock. A couple of squads of riflemen, working smoothly together from long practice, took care of them easily. They flanked them, picked off most of them with their rifles and finished the job with hand grenades. Within fifteen minutes they were clearing the roadblock. We rolled the bloody Jerries into the ditch with our feet.

It took threats and a couple of jabs with rifle barrels to get the small Frenchman moving again. Finally he moved ahead of us, setting a fast pace. It was too fast. It almost cost him his life.

About a quarter-mile past the roadblock he was churning down a stretch of road with cleared spaces on both sides when a hail of bullets kicked up the dust all about him. We heard the chatter of a burp gun a couple of hundred yards away. The Frenchman squatted slowly, arms outstretched, head upward, like a robin watching a circling hawk. Bullets danced merrily around him until our shouts broke the spell. He went head-first into the ditch. The burp gun was far up in the woods so we decided to bypass it. We crawled on our bellies across the open space and moved on.

Every couple of hundred yards we passed a farmhouse. We always slowed down and eyed them carefully, but although we saw smoke coming from the chimneys of some, there was no sign of life otherwise. We grew careless. We were almost abreast of a house at a bend in the road when a hail of bullets poured from the windows. Men on both sides of Britt and me grunted. We heard the dull plop as bullets struck them. We scurried to the ditch again. The house was less than a hundred feet away.

The rain of fire from the windows was deadly. It chewed the edge of the ditch above our heads as it moved back and forth. I raised my head cautiously between bursts. Jerry had cleverly camouflaged the house. The front windows, command-

ing a view of the road, were cemented over except for a small opening at the bottom. Green blinds had been painted on the concrete. Only the bottom half of the front door was of wood. The rest was solid concrete, cleverly painted. We opened fire against the house in between the raking, deadly hail they threw at us. Our bullets scarcely scratched the concrete.

I grunted and looked at Britt. —Too bad we don't have some artillery set up.

—Yeah.

I had looked back at the house when I heard him say, —Give me that. I turned in time to see him snatch a bazooka from a soldier next to him.

—That won't go through those walls, I said.

—I'm going to put it through the bottom part of that door.

He crawled up the ditch until he was in front of the house and raised the bazooka. He took aim and then paused and looked over his shoulder. He saw, as I did, that the flare back from the bazooka would hit the back of the ditch and bounce back on him. He set his face and looked back toward the house. Bullets started traversing the ditch again. We ducked, automatically, and looked at each other. He smiled slightly and shrugged. Deliberately, calmly, he eased forward over the edge of the ditch and wiggled to the middle of the road on his belly. I held my breath while he took dead aim and fired. The rocket splintered through the heavy door as if it were an orange crate. We were not at all prepared for what happened.

Almost instantly there was a muffled roar and the whole house literally exploded in our faces. Flames and black, oily smoke shot up twenty feet. Jerries began tumbling from the side windows and we picked them off like targets in a shooting gallery. The house began to disintegrate with a series of rumbling explosions. The house had been loaded with gasoline and ammunition. Debris started falling about us and we got up and ran. When I overtook Britt he was waving the bazooka like a drum major's baton.

—Bull's eye! he said. —Wow!

We held to each other and bent double with laughter.

After another half-hour we began to see signs that someone had passed through ahead of us. Dead Jerries were draped over

roadblocks, sprawled in the middle of the road, and stared up with blank eyes and open mouths from ditches. Our own dead were also scattered along. Nothing—absolutely nothing—that happens to a man in war gives him the same shock as coming across a friend lying bloody and stark in a ditch. It is not nearly as bad when he is killed by your side or even in the same fight. Somehow then you are prepared.

It was still midmorning when we arrived at the château. Most of the outfit had landed on the drop area and were already there. The colonel had established a command post in one of the outlying buildings to the château. We relaxed and ate while the stragglers drifted in. The little Frenchman had completely recovered now. He was overripe and we tried to avoid him, but I saw him holding small groups of French who were around the château spellbound with accounts of his adventures.

By 1600 all except one of the battalion of 75 mm. howitzers which had been dropped with us were assembled and in place. It felt good to know they were at our backs when we moved out toward our objective.

It was a small hill three miles away located athwart the Rhone Valley. The gist of our battle orders took only one sentence. We were to prevent reinforcements from coming through the valley until ground troops that were storming ashore twenty-seven kilometers to our rear could establish a beach-head. We hit Jerry fairly regularly all afternoon, but he was never in enough force to hold us up for long. Shortly after 1800 we were skirting the small hill which was our objective when a stocky middle-aged Frenchman came running up the road toward us. He was about to drop from exhaustion. We stopped and eyed him coldly, suspiciously, while he fought to recover his breath. He had very little English. —Stop . . . stop . . . here! he said between gasps. —*Allemands*—Boches! I pray you, stop . . . here!

—Where are the Germans? the colonel asked.

—Near . . . *très* near. Many Boches!

He groped to express himself. —Many . . . as rain . . . many rain!

We looked at each other. We were standing on the only road that went through the narrow valley. Except for our point a

hundred yards ahead, it was deserted for as far as we could see. To our right was the small hill. To our left was a broad vineyard, dotted here and there with houses and other buildings. Beyond it was a railroad line, running along a cut in a steep mountain.

—You stay—here! the Frenchman said.

Men around us smirked and snorted while the colonel thought.

Finally he turned to a sergeant. —Ray, take your squad and run a recon.

There were the usual mumbled curses and groans and the sergeant got his men together. They were just beginning to move ahead when the first ragged volley came from the vineyard. Then the whole valley opened up. One of the first shots struck the Frenchman. He stiffened and his hand clutched my arm for an instant before he fell to the road. I looked over my shoulder. The vineyard was so thick with Jerries that it seemed to be moving forward in a shimmering grayish-green mass.

The last thing I saw as I sprinted for the shelter of the hill was the Frenchman lying in a pool of his own blood. I remember him when people say harsh things about the French today.

The next fifteen hours were a nightmare.

How shall I tell it? Every man is guts, blood, bone and flesh. He may fall differently, he may groan differently and he may be blown apart worse or less than others. But when he dies, he is dead—and he looks like the dead about him.

All the rest of that day and through that night, Jerry blasted us to bits. He brought up self-propelled 88's and 75's and skillfully set out to dislodge us from the hill. He had all the ammunition he wanted. If he didn't knock us out, he had to blow it up anyway. He started methodically from left to right and placed a shell every twenty-five yards on the mountainside. Then he started again, shifting to fill in the gaps he had missed. All the time his infantry in the vineyard raked us with rifles, burp guns, machine pistols and small mortars.

We fought back. We fought back desperately.

We ripped the vineyard to pieces with our small arms, fired

air bursts and white phosphorus and delayed-action shells from our 75's. Britt and I crouched in a hole all that night, teeth rattling, eyes watering, deafened by the blasts and smoke from the shells. The barrels of our carbines became overheated. Britt wore a blister on his hand from pressing the button on our radio. He sent missions because in the first few minutes of fighting we had become separated from the colonel. The two riflemen attached to the squad had been killed trying to locate him and establish a telephone connection. Little Anderson finally succeeded.

After a while a man becomes numbed to misery and fear. Nothing remains except hate. We were possessed by hatred. We could have gladly ground them to bits and eaten them.

In the first morning light, even the contours of the hill seemed to have changed. The trees were bare of foliage or shattered to splinters. Our dead sprawled from holes like withered petals from a flower. There was not a sign of life, only the incessant din of firing which long before had ceased to penetrate our consciousness.

Jerry must have thought he had us. A great ragged, grayish-green wave detached itself from the vineyard. It got as far as the road at the bottom of the hill before it began to dissolve from our steady fire. It faltered and then washed back to the vineyard.

Every hour or so, the wave would gather momentum and wash forward again. Always we forced it to recede before it reached the hill.

Sometime during that morning Jerry must have slipped away, leaving his stacked dead in the vineyard, before we realized it.

We heard a distant cough of mortars and saw their slow march through the vineyard an hour before columns of our own troops who had come ashore on the beaches appeared. They passed for hours, an unbroken olive-drab stream. We didn't stand up and cheer them. I doubt if they ever knew we were on the hill. We lay back and watched silently. They had given us back our lives, but we were too weary to appreciate the gift.

Finally we picked up our wounded and covered our mangled dead and moved to the top of the hill. We fell into an exhausted sleep.

It was almost sundown when, suddenly, we were awakened by a shell screaming in. It burst with a roar in the branches of a small tree less than twenty yards away. We sat up, instantly alert, staring at each other through bloodshot eyes. It was several seconds before we realized it had been one of ours. Britt snapped the radio on and snarled.

—Sugar Four to Sugar One. Watch where in hell you're firing. You almost hit us with that last round. Over.

The radio hummed for a long time before a voice said, —Sugar One to Sugar Four. What is your position? Over.

Swearing, I broke out my map and gave our coordinates to Britt, who transmitted them.

The radio hummed thoughtfully and then the voice spoke again.

—We have had a report that enemy are in that position.

—Well, they're not, Britt said irritably.

He snapped the radio off and we lay back. Then, almost simultaneously, we sprang up and grabbed our carbines. Moving slowly, tensely, we began to scour the area. We were moving through a nearby pine thicket when Britt hissed. I turned. Less than fifty feet away, three Jerries, probably the remnant of a patrol which had tried to outflank us earlier, lay on their bellies behind some stones on a small ledge. They were motionless, looking down the slope. We raised our carbines and fired at the same time. We fired until our magazines were empty. One Jerry lurched forward and fell over the ledge. The other two relaxed and began to blend with the ground in the peculiar way the dead have.

We stood looking down at them for a long time before Britt spoke.

—That ends it.

—Yeah, I said.

He smiled slightly. —Good teamwork.

We looked into each other's red-rimmed eyes and smoke-blackened faces and grinned.

—Just like the Gold Dust twins, I said.

It wasn't bad after that. We rested a few days and got replacements. At nights we slipped out and stole jeeps from other outfits for our motor pool. Then, moving leisurely, we began to

sweep Jerry out of the small towns in the Maritime Alps. Sometimes a garrison fought and we had to blast it. But most times they withdrew steadily, while we goosed them along with our artillery. We had heavy support. Not only could we call on a whole division dragged ashore, but when the terrain was right, we got help from the battering fire of a cruiser and several destroyers riding offshore.

We also had air support. Some of our worst hours were spent marching past riddled convoys, strewn with swollen putrefying Jerries, which had been stopped by our fighter planes. French farmers begged gasoline from us to drench the stinking bodies so they could burn them to a crisp and pitchfork them into holes.

In every town we were treated as conquering heroes. The cobblestone streets were lined with cheering, excited villagers. Women kissed us and pelted us with flowers. We became bleary-eyed on the wine they forced on us.

I shall never forget a tiny Frenchwoman who lived on the edge of one of the towns. Her cottage was at the top of a steep hill. As we left the town, already sloshing with wine and cursing the march ahead, she stood at the edge of the road holding a bottle of wine and a small glass. She was frail and gray-haired, dressed entirely in black. She offered the wine eagerly at first, but as the men plodded past without even glancing at her, she looked dejected, almost pathetic.

When I drew abreast and saw her eyes I had to stop.

—*Bonjour, madame*, I said.

She thrust out the bottle and glass eagerly, smiled with delight.

—*Bonjour, m'sieur, bonjour*.

I poured a glass of the warm wine and forced it down.

—*Vive l'Amérique!* she said.

—*Vive la France!* I answered.

—*Vive le President Roosevelt*, she said.

—*Vive le General de Gaulle!*

Her eyes were bright. —*Vive le . . .* She paused and groped.

—*Vive le Radio Music Hall*, she said triumphantly.

—*Vive les Folies-Bergère!*

I left her dancing with excitement.

After a month, we had herded Jerry into the narrow little

Sospel Valley only five kilometers from the pass into Italy. We bivouacked on a ridge overlooking the valley for two days before an order came through to dig in where we were. The colonel was smiling after he came back from a commanding officers' meeting in Nice.

—Well, this is what is known as a stalemate, men. There are too many of them for us to tackle them. Our orders are to stay here and hold them. There won't be any offensive action. Establish your defense lines and set up OP's and blast them whenever you see them. But be careful how you shoot. There are civilians down there, too.

Establishing an observation post wasn't difficult. The French had already fortified the area. We found a camouflaged concrete bunker, open on top, which gave us a view of the entire valley. The little huddle of gray and ancient buildings which made up the village of Sospel was a mile in the distance. There were neat farms scattered up and down the valley but they seemed deserted. Poplar-lined roads criss-crossed the valley but they were not being used. Sometimes we saw a few white ambulances with large red crosses winding through the village. Occasionally we fired on Jerries foraging in the deserted orchards.

For several days, I busied myself zeroing in various sections of the valley with our howitzers. These zeroed-in areas, called checkpoints, were numbered and carefully recorded at Fire Direction Center. Even if we heard Jerry moving out at night, I could, by merely giving a number over the radio, drop a curtain of fire. Soon our firing stopped what slight enemy activity we had seen at first. For days at a time we searched the valley without seeing a sign of life—or only one.

It was early one morning and the haze had just begun to lift from the valley when I sighted a Jerry emerge from behind the buildings of Sospel on a bicycle and start pedaling up the road toward Italy. He was a short, dumpy little man. His uniform was bulgy and ill-fitting. He had his head bent low over the handle bars of the bicycle and his short legs were churning furiously. At the distance, I couldn't see his face. But I got the impression he was a cocky little man, swollen with a feeling of the importance of his mission.

As he approached one of the checkpoints I had fired in, I

turned to Anderson and told him to radio a fire mission. He relayed this information and the brisk impersonal voice from Fire Direction Center asked us to identify our target.

—Enemy courier on a bicycle, I said.

Anderson relayed the information. There was a short pause. The radio voice crackled, —Sugar One to Sugar Four. Refuse to fire. Over.

Britt and the other men came and stood by my side. We grinned as the little man sped out of sight.

—Man! said Anderson,—that little snigglefritz is really moving!

We called him Snigglefritz after that. Every day at the same time he came wheeling out from behind the buildings and sped up the road. Sometimes, out of boredom, we tried to get permission to fire on him. Always Fire Direction Center gave us an abrupt, —Refuse to fire.

We became almost fond of him after a while. Watching him was a morning ritual.

From time to time we still blasted spots where we thought Jerry might be hiding. Sometimes he answered with 88's or mortars that killed a few of us. But, generally, the days dragged with nothing to do at all. After two weeks news came through that week-end passes to Nice would be given on a rotating basis. Our squad was luckier than most. There were always idle forward-observation squads at First Direction Center now that we were not on the move. We got passes every week end.

It felt strange to board a six-by-six, sometimes while Jerry was blasting us with mortars, and after a few minutes to travel down the winding mountain road, be completely out of the war. One afternoon, within a few minutes after watching while some bodies were loaded into an ambulance, we passed through one of the small villages where there was a festival with dancing in the streets.

It was becoming an easy war. We began to call it the Champagne Campaign.

SIX

On the Riviera that season
There was a new smart set:
American Army officers
And their women.
Somehow,
I didn't belong.
The noisy little cocktail lounges
Were too plush;
The night clubs
Stifled me.
The chic women who sat around
With tinkling bracelets and mocking eyes
Waiting to be picked up
Made me uneasy.
Like all whores
They loved money,
But they already had money—
All they needed.
They charged another price.
I couldn't bring myself to pay it:
To say the things
They wanted to hear
From young men.
It was not my morals.
Maybe it was naïveté,
Or maybe it was just a lack
Of social grace.
Anyway, I found there were other things
I liked better.
I liked to walk into a restaurant

And sit at a table
And eat food off clean plates
Laid on a white tablecloth,
Even though,
Half the time, I ate
Disguised GI rations.
I liked to walk along the streets
Thronged with civilians
And look in shop windows.
Most of all,
I just liked
To sit
And not have to worry
About stopping a howling shell
Or a whining bullet.

The army had requisitioned a villa for officers high on the hill overlooking Villefranche. It was a great magnificent old pile with sunken marble baths and sweeping verandas. After a few trips to Nice, I spent most of my leaves there. I soaked in the tub for hours at a time. Only infants and soldiers appreciate what a gorgeous thing a bath really is. I liked to lie in the sun on the verandas, reading old magazines. In the afternoons I would walk back upon the hill and explore the little roads that wound between the impressive villas.

One afternoon I was sitting on a stone wall in front of one of these villas, looking out into the sea, when a little man in a black alpaca jacket came out of the gate. He asked me in halting English if I were an American. I said I was, and he pointed toward the villa and said his master wanted to see me.

I followed him up to the villa. It was large and imposing. The lawn was broad and well-kept, bordered with flower beds. The little servant's English had been very bad. It was not a man on the veranda but a heavy, white-haired woman. She looked to be in her late sixties. There was something wrong with her right arm. It was swollen to twice its normal size and hung uselessly. In her other hand she carried a cane, an ordinary old-fashioned walking stick.

She didn't smile when I came up, but there was a glint in her eyes. —Young man, are you an American?

—Yes, ma'am, I said.

She gave me a small, satisfied grunt.

—Well, what are you—a general?

I grinned at her. —No, ma'am, I'm a lieutenant. I'm Lieutenant Loggins.

—Don't see many of you up this way, she said. —I'm Mrs. Lafayette Blair, and I'm from the States, too, as you can probably tell. She eyed me speculatively for a moment. —Well, come on in and have some tea.

Without waiting for an answer, she turned abruptly and, leaning heavily on her cane, walked toward the door.

Grinning, I followed her.

Her drawing room was just what I had expected. It was large and the furniture was heavy, and old-fashioned and expensive. The walls were covered with paintings and there was a profusion of expensive bric-a-brac. Vases filled with flowers were everywhere. She motioned me to a chair with her cane and settled herself in a massive rocker. She put her foot on a small needlepoint stool, picked up a small silver bell from a table at her side and tinkled it. A middle-aged maid appeared.

—We'll have tea now, Anna, Mrs. Blair said, —and please tell Monique we have company.

She sat back and openly studied me. She nodded toward my parachutist badge.

—What's that thing you're wearing? Do you fly an airplane?

—No, ma'am, I'm a parachutist.

—What's it like?

I grinned at her. —In what way?

—What's it like to jump out of an airplane?

—There's really not much to it, I said.

She still hadn't changed expression.

—Don't you get scared sometimes?

I laughed.

—No, I said, it's . . . well, it gets to be Coney Island stuff after a while.

—Like the Scenic Railway?

—Yes, ma'am.

—Did you get scared the first time you did it?

—No, that's always the easiest one. You've had so much training, and have jumped off so many towers and out of so

many mock-up planes that you do it automatically. You've been conditioned to a point where I suppose you'd jump out of a plane *without* a parachute if you were ordered to. The tough one comes later, after you've made a few jumps and suddenly realize that it can be a dangerous business. Everybody sweats out at least one.

She grunted. She was enjoying herself.

—Did you . . . sweat one out?

—My third one.

—What was special about it?

—Nothing really, I suppose, I said. —I'd seen a couple of guys break bones and I'd had a hard landing myself . . . and I guess it started eating me.

She sat silently for a while.

—I'll do it, she said.

—Do what, ma'am?

—Jump out of a parachute.

I laughed. —You mean jump out of a plane. Always hold on to your parachute.

She still didn't smile. She wrinkled her nose and sniffed a few times.

—That's what I mean, she said. She thought about it awhile. Finally she asked, —Where is your home?

—Los Angeles.

She sniffed again.

—Hateful place.

—Oh, it's not so bad.

—My home was in Philadelphia, she said. —Mr. Blair was in the insurance business there. She paused and added slowly, —That was many years ago.

—How long have . . . It was then that I looked up and saw Monique for the first time. She was standing in the door and I could tell she was surprised to see me. As I slowly got to my feet, I thought how incredibly lucky I was to be there. She was small and dark and stood very erect. Her jet-black hair was parted in the middle and pulled severely back into a small bun. She wore a simple soft-rose linen dress. I half-expected her to be shy, but when she entered the room she was smiling and completely poised.

—This is Lieutenant Loggins, Monique. He's an American, her mother said.

—So I see, she said. When she smiled her upper lip made a straight line across her even, white teeth. She gave me her hand. It was slender and cool.

—Lieutenant Loggins jumps out of airplanes, her mother said.

She didn't say, —How interesting, or, —How fascinating. She cocked her small head and said, —Oh? I flushed and mumbled something and was relieved when just then the maid entered pushing a tea trolley.

Monique looked at the trolley.

—Why, Mama, you're not giving the lieutenant tea? She pronounced *Mama* as the French do.

Mrs. Blair wrinkled her nose. —He's only a lieutenant. We laughed.

—But American men do not drink tea, Monique said. —Papa never did.

She smiled at me. —Mama has some Scotch if you had rather have it.

—Oh, tea is fine, I said.

Mrs. Blair gave me a slow wink but didn't change expression. —The Scotch is the real McCoy, Lieutenant.

—Mama buys it on the black market from a man who steals it from the British in Nice, Monique said.

Mrs. Blair clucked her tongue. —Monique!

Monique laughed. —The lieutenant will not report you, Mama. She smiled at me. —Will you?

—Not if she gives me a drink now and then, I said.

Monique poured the tea and then sat on the floor at her mother's side. From time to time, unconsciously it seemed, she would tilt her head and rub it caressingly against the arm of her mother's chair. Mrs. Blair didn't respond to this little gesture but I saw from it how much affection there was between them.

Monique and I did most of the talking, with only an occasional remark from her mother. I don't remember all we talked about. But I soon found myself relaxed and at ease. That alone was enough to make the afternoon memorable. I had never gotten on easily with people and the Army had made me even more brusque and withdrawn. From time to time, Monique would pass around a platter of small tea sandwiches. I couldn't

take my eyes off her. I was fascinated by the precise way she spoke; the way she studied my face with deepest concentration while I told stories; the way she threw back her head and laughed and looked at her mother to be sure she had not missed anything. I was smitten.

She had an avid interest in America. Finally I asked, —When were you home last?

She shook her head slowly. —I have never been there.

—Why, I didn't . . . I began.

—Monique was born in Paris, Mrs. Blair said.

Monique sighed. —Papa had promised to take me to America the summer I was eighteen. He died that spring. The war started soon after and . . . She shrugged.

—You should have gone home when the war started. I think it would have been better for you, I said.

Mrs. Blair's voice was almost brusque. —My health has been poor.

—Oh . . . oh, sure, I forgot. I was embarrassed. I had forgotten about the swollen arm and the cane.

It was growing late. I deliberately lingered, hoping that I would be invited to dinner. No one made the offer and finally, reluctantly, I said I had to leave. I knew I had to see Monique again. I didn't quite know how to go about asking her in front of her mother.

She made it easy for me. She stood up. —I will see you to the door, she said.

I told Mrs. Blair good-by.

—Watch your step, Lieutenant, she said.

At the door, Monique offered her hand. —I am happy to have met you, Lieutenant.

I held her hand. —Look . . . look . . . may I see you again?

Her smile faded. —But, of course. I am here every day. Do come again sometime.

—Tonight? I asked.

She laughed and gently tugged her hand free. —But it is night already.

—Tomorrow then, I said. —Maybe we could . . . I floundered. —Maybe we could . . . uh, go somewhere and have a beer . . . uh, or something.

She smiled. —But I don't . . . She paused and then laughed. —I don't like beer.

I could feel my ears burning. —Oh, I meant . . . I didn't quite know what to say.

She was studying my face, almost gravely. She smiled. It was a soft smile. —Perhaps you would like to come to dinner tomorrow?

—Yeah! I said. —Gee, yeah, that sounds swell!

I knew I sounded like a schoolboy. I felt like one.

I bought my first dress uniform the next day. I bought an olive-drab blouse which fitted perfectly from a captain from Alabama, a pair of pink trousers from a major from New York, and a brand-new shirt from a black-market place near the Hotel Negresco. But an officer's overseas cap was a problem. I fretted away half a day trying to find one. Finally, as I was passing the American Bar, I saw a lieutenant standing outside who looked just drunk enough to be reasonable.

I walked up to him.

—I'll give you five dollars for that cap.

He was drunker than I thought. He swayed and tried to bring me into focus.

—How mush?

—Five dollars, I said.

—Whush yer size?

—Seven and a quarter.

He raised a finger solemnly.

—Jush a minnit. Jush a minnit. He lurched into the bar.

Thirty seconds later he was back. He handed me an almost new cap with real gold braid. A highly polished brigadier-general's star glittered on it. I kept an eye on the door, grabbed the cap, stuffed it into my shirt front and handed him five dollars.

—Thanks, I said.

—Any ole time. Any ole time, he said.

I soaked in the tub an hour and brushed my boots three times. Still I managed to arrive too early. Monique waved to me from one of the flower beds on the front lawn.

—I know I'm early, I began lamely, but I . . . I . . .

She was studying my face in that curious way I had noticed before. She smiled and put her hand on my arm.

—It is good to be prompt, she said. —Come, come, let me show you what I have accomplished today. I followed her around to the immense back lawn which was bordered with poplars. There was a newly turned flower bed in the center of it.

—In here, she said, pointing proudly, I have planted two baskets of narcissus bulbs.

She looked at me gravely. —Did you know that in some regions when there was no food that people ate narcissus bulbs?

I smiled slightly. —I'm not surprised. I've seen them eat worse things—dogs and cats and leaves and grass.

Her eyes were fixed on my face. —But, yes, of course, why do I always forget you are a soldier? I suppose it is because the Germans have gone. It seems the war is over.

—Well, it isn't, I said. I pointed to the Maritime Alps in the distance. —Right over there men are fighting this minute.

—Is it bad? she asked.

I shrugged. —It's been worse, but it's always bad when people shoot at you.

She looked toward the mountains thoughtfully. Then suddenly she smiled. She took my arm.

—Come, we will not talk about the war. I will show you my flowers.

She took me from flower bed to flower bed, chatting about the flowers and the planting. I scarcely heard her. She was wearing a white dress. Against it her smooth, olive skin seemed to have a warm glow. She smelled faintly of cologne and good soap. I was tinglingly aware of her hand on my arm. I wondered if her lips were as soft as they looked.

She must have sensed that my concentration had nothing to do with her conversation. She flushed a little and smiled at me.

—Perhaps you would like an apéritif, yes?

I grinned. —*Mais oui*, I would perhaps, yes.

She faced me and put her hands on her hips. —Oh, so, you do not think my American is so good, eh, Mac? Oh, my aching back.

Laughing, arm in arm, we entered the house through the back door. She led me through the kitchen, where the cook was bending over an old-fashioned range, into a butler's pantry.

I have a surprise for you, she said. She opened a small refrigerator and produced a bottle of beer.

—*Voilà!*

It was French beer and not very good but I was pleased beyond reason. She poured herself a glass of vermouth and we went into the sun porch. It was furnished with gay rattan furniture and much brighter than the drawing room. We were laughing and chatting when Mrs. Blair entered. She wore stiff black with lace at her throat and cuffs. She was as unsmiling as ever.

I stood up self-consciously.

—Well, Lieutenant, we meet again.

—Yes, ma'am, I said.

She sat down heavily and studied me intently. She grunted.

—I had no idea you found my conversation so interesting.

Monique laughed.

I grinned, but I knew my ears were red. —Oh, but I did, I said.

Mrs. Blair saw our drinks. —I will join you, Monique.

Monique smiled. —Very well, Mama, but if you have a drink now, you cannot have your toddy at bedtime.

Mrs. Blair thought this over a moment. She sighed. —I shall forego it then. She looked at me. —When one reaches my age, Lieutenant . . . She paused. —You do have a first name, I presume?

—Sam, ma'am, I said.

She nodded and went on calmly, —Sam, a good night's rest is more important than a good appetite.

She studied me a moment. —I suppose they called you Sammy?

—No, ma'am.

—What did your mother call you?

—I don't know, I said. That didn't sound right. —I . . . well, that is . . . I never knew my mother.

I could see the interest growing in her level old eyes.

—Well, what about your father?

Nobody had ever pried into my life like this before. Nobody had dared. But, surprisingly, I found I didn't mind.

—I never knew my father either. I was raised in a home—it was an orphanage in Ventura County.

Her eyes were steady. She grunted. —Well, you seem to have survived all right.

I smiled. —So far, ma'am.

Dinner was served in the old walnut-paneled dining room, which was lined with a double row of Limoges dishes. Except for an onion soup served in individual tureens sealed with pastry, it was an American meal: a leg of lamb, mashed potatoes, string beans and a huge salad. It was the first home-cooked meal I had had in more than three years. My appetite didn't escape Mrs. Blair.

While we were waiting for dessert, she said, —Monique, I feel one of my infrequent urges to give you some motherly advice.

Monique smiled, sat up primly and folded her hands on the table.

—Yes, Mama, dear?

—Observe Sammy's appetite, said Mrs. Blair. —It's the appetite of a typical American male. It strikes just the proper balance between gluttony and finickiness. Foreigners never malign Americans so much as when they claim they are indifferent to food. Feed an American male well and he's your slave for life.

I found I wasn't embarrassed a bit. I grinned and dug into the chocolate soufflé that Lucien, the manservant, had just put before me.

Lucien served us coffee and liqueurs on the sunporch. Mrs. Blair finished her coffee, sighed and rose abruptly.

—Age, Sammy, age, she said.

—I will bring your toddy up, Mama, Monique said.

Mrs. Blair nodded. She looked at me as if she were trying to make up her mind about something.

—Come back, Sammy, she said finally. —Come back soon. She turned abruptly and left the room.

Monique was curled up in a corner of the divan. I smiled at her.

—I like your mother.

She nodded, smiling. —Yes, I know. She likes you, too, Sam.

—Tell me, Monique, doesn't she ever smile?

Monique shook her head. —No, Sam, she . . . She made a

helpless little gesture. —Well, I made up a name for it when I was a little girl. She . . . well, she tinkles.

I laughed. —You mean she twinkles.

—No, Sam, she tinkles—tinkles inside somehow. She smiled and shook her head as she tried to think of a way to explain. —When you know her well enough . . . it's . . . it's almost as if there were an actual sound.

—I think maybe I understand, I said.

Monique's eyes turned somber. She spoke slowly. —Mama has not always been happy. Sometimes when one . . . when one wishes to disguise unhappiness, one learns to disguise all emotions. She paused. —Papa's death was a great blow to her. She has never recovered. And now she is sick, she is very sick. Her heart is bad.

She looked at me a moment, then smiled. —I am glad Mama likes you. She does not approve of many people. Mama and I have always lived close to one another. Perhaps too close. We have been all alone except for the servants, and even when Papa was alive it was not much different. When I was twelve Mama and Papa put me in a school in Switzerland. But three months later Mama came and got me. Then there were governesses and, later, tutors. She laughed. —Mama never cared for my governesses and tutors. They would come and go, sometimes two or three of them a year. She looked thoughtful. —I think, perhaps, the reason Mama likes you is that—well, somehow, you are both alike. Maybe it is because you are both Americans. I have never known any Americans very well.

She surprised me. —How are we alike?

She thought a moment. —Because you are both . . . you are both formidable.

—But I'm not formidable, Monique.

She looked at me searchingly and smiled slightly. —Yes, you are formidable. Even when you are shy and being polite and well-mannered like a little boy, you are somehow formidable. There is a . . . a hardness about you. It is in the way you hold your shoulders . . . the way you seem to be waiting for something. There is great . . . well, violence in you, Sam. Perhaps it is an American trait. Already I have learned that I must look in your eyes closely. Then I think I begin to understand you better.

I sat silently.

—How old are you, Sam? she asked.

—Twenty-six, I said.

—Ah, that is good.

I smiled at her. —Why is it good?

She was still thoughtful. —It is good because you are young. Perhaps it is the war and the things which you have seen that have made you . . . have made it difficult for you to be at peace.

—No. I don't think that's it—that's not it altogether, anyway, I said.

I sat thinking about what she had said about me. I knew it was true. I looked at her. She was smiling softly, but her eyes were serious. I looked at her level brow, the highlights in her black hair. I had never before known a woman like her. I thought of the slack-mouthed girls I had gone with, the vacuum-faced little blondes; the chattering little wisecracking waitresses and beauticians. Suddenly, for the first time in my life, I wanted desperately for someone to understand me.

—It's not the war. At least, that's not the only reason. I know what you mean about . . . about the way I am. Maybe it's because I was an orphan. I don't know. I can't take a cross-bearing, because I never knew any other life. Maybe it's because I know something very bad happened to me when I was a little kid, and I've never found out—I've never had the guts to try to find out what it was. Nobody knows it . . . you're the first person I've ever told it to, but I remember the day they took me to a home.

—I remember it was a cop and a woman in a blue uniform, maybe she was a cop, too, or a nurse, who took me there. It's strange that I should remember it because I wasn't quite four. I don't remember where we started from, but I remember sitting between the cop and the woman in a black touring car. The roads weren't paved then and after a while we stopped and the cop put up side curtains. I remember something else. There was some sort of bandage around my head and my hands and arms were covered with scratches. I kept trying to pick the scabs off. The woman took my hands and held them. She called me "lambie pie." It was my favorite word for a long time. I liked her very much.

—When we got to the home, a fat woman in a white uniform

picked me up and hugged me. I guess she was the matron at that time. All the other attendants came in too and hugged me and made a fuss over me. When I got older and watched other kids come in for the first time I realized how unusual that was. But what I remember most is that, suddenly, I turned and ran out the door and got to the front steps. I stood there and screamed, "Mother! Mother!" until they came and took me back inside.

—Isn't it strange—I can remember yelling "Mother! Mother!" but I can't remember the woman I was calling?

Monique hadn't taken her eyes off me.

I smiled at her. —It wasn't bad in the home. There were other kids to play with and they kept us clean and . . . and, well, I never got a spanking I didn't deserve and there was always enough to eat. But you learn to watch after yourself, even as a little kid. The worst thing is to let the other kids think they can push you around. Kids can be real cruel to each other, lots crueller than even soldiers.

—When I got bigger, about eight, they began boarding me out. They paid people so much a month to take us into their homes. It wasn't so bad; the people they picked were always respectable. They were pretty poor, though, and if they had kids of their own, it wasn't always much fun. I don't remember many of the places. All of us kids in the home got used to being shifted around a lot. We'd stay at one place a year and then go to another and another.

—When I was fifteen, though, I was real lucky and hit a place where it was pretty nice. I stayed there until I finished high school. The folks were named Jones. They didn't have any children and they were pretty hard up sometimes, but we always ate well and they kept me dressed as well as the other kids. Mrs. Jones was a nice woman, kind of whiny sometimes, but Mr. Jones and I hit it off swell.

—He had been a yard switchman for the Southern Pacific until he lost part of his foot. He was a kind of a joke in the neighborhood—nearly everybody living there worked on the railroad—because of the way he lost his foot. They called him Caboose Jones—it was sort of sad but sort of funny, too.

I grinned at Monique. She had not taken her eyes off me. —Would you like to hear how he lost his foot?

—Yes, Sam, she said.

—Do you know what a caboose is?

She shook her head.

—Well, a caboose is the last little car on a train. It's the place where the train crew sleeps and plays cards and dominoes during off-duty hours.

—When Mr. Jones worked on the railroad it was his job to see that cars were shunted to the right place in the yards. After he got them placed he had to climb up on top of them and fix the hand brake so they wouldn't roll away.

—Well, one day he had just put a caboose in position and climbed down after fixing the brake when it began to move a little bit. It didn't move much—it was just barely rolling down the tracks. He was standing right by the wheels. Without thinking, just instinctively, he put his foot in front of one of the wheels to stop it. Of course, the caboose weighed tons. Almost before he knew what was happening the wheel had caught his foot and rolled right over it. He lost all of his toes.

I was disappointed when Monique didn't laugh.

—You don't think that's funny?

—Tell me more about Mr. Jones, she said.

—Well, he got compensation from the railroad for his foot, but he couldn't work as a switchman any more. He was a nice little guy, kind of scrawny, with a big Adam's apple and weather-beaten looking like most railroad men. He nearly always wore blue denim shirts, buttoned at the collar, but no tie. He spent a lot of time with me, helping me with my lessons, listening to my troubles and trying to give me advice. I guess he was pretty much a kid himself, or maybe he was just lonely.

—As I said he was something of a joke among the other men. He took that pretty hard. He never talked to me about it except once. He was taking me fishing one day when he saw a crowd of railroad men standing outside Nell's Place, a chili joint near the yards. He straightened up and I saw he was trying hard not to limp. But when we passed by one of the men yelled out, "Say, Caboose, did your toes get cold this morning?"

—He didn't even look around. He didn't say anything until we reached the lake and started baiting our hooks. Then he said, "I swear to you, boy, it seemed logical. I know it was a

damfool thing, but it seemed logical at the time. I don't mind losing my toes so much but I sure do hate the indignity."

She laughed now. —It is funny, she said, but it is also very sad.

We sat smiling at each other. —Is he still your friend? she asked.

—No, he died. He died six months after I finished high school. If he had lived, I suppose I would have gotten to go to college. He was set on me going to college. I was, too—then.

—He helped me get my first job. He had a friend who owned a parking lot. I went to work parking cars. Once a week when I got paid we'd sit down at the kitchen table and, first, we'd subtract the board I was paying, then we'd figure how much I could put aside toward college. I smiled. —He cut it pretty close for me sometimes.

—The idea was that I would work a year and then go to college a year until I graduated. It would have taken twice as long that way, but I guess I could have done it.

I shrugged. —But then, of course, he died.

—But why didn't you go on as you had planned?

—I . . . well, I had to pay for his funeral. At least, I wanted to pay for his funeral. I didn't have but three hundred and forty dollars by then and it took it all, and I signed a note for the rest. He didn't leave anything except one small insurance policy. Then Mrs. Jones wanted to go live with her sister in Iowa and I paid her fare. I never quite got organized again after that. I was too young, I suppose. I needed a command post.

—I lived around in boardinghouses and got to knocking around at night and I just never got ahead. After a while I quit the parking lot and went to work in a filling station. I was just an ordinary grease monkey, filling tanks and airing up tires and wiping windshields. I think maybe I could have gone to night school except I had to work three nights a week. I kept saying I was going to break away, but times weren't too good in 1938. About the only other jobs around were for salesmen. I smiled. —I'm not the salesman type.

—And then?

I shrugged. —And then—nothing. When the draft began in 1940 I knew it was only a matter of time until I was called,

so I volunteered. I didn't mind the Army like some people did. All my life I'd had the same sort of impersonal discipline I got. Besides it was nice to find a place where you could do your job and get on without showing your teeth to people and slapping them on the back.

—But you do not like the Army now, Sam.

—There's a slight difference now . . . there's a war on.

We sat silently. —The Army changed for me the day we left the States—even before I heard a gun fired. We left from Hampton Roads. It was a dreary, overcast day. We were tired and dirty because we had been sitting up in a shuttered train for almost two days. There were two long lines of us. We had our helmets and our guns and everything we owned on our backs. We were marching off to the Great Adventure. But there were no brass bands to see us off in this war. We shuffled along through silent, empty sheds. Nobody said a word. A big, rusty-looking troopship was waiting. There was some delay about taking us aboard. We stood lined up quietly, like polite little school kids. Then some Red Cross gray ladies appeared and began walking down the lines. They were quiet, middle-aged women. They looked into our faces and you had the feeling they wanted to cry. I suppose they were crying. They carefully handed each of us a paper cup and filled it with scalding coffee. They didn't ask us if we wanted it. And no man refused it. We understood what the coffee meant.

—It was much too hot to drink. We stood there, holding it politely.

—The whistle on the troopship blared. As if it were a command, each man stooped and carefully placed his untouched coffee beside his right foot. We marched aboard the ship and left the cups there. They were lined up as far as the eye could follow. As the ship left the dock, I stood looking at those hundreds of little white cups, lined up in such military precision. They looked like tombstones. Some of them were. All of them were really. No man who left one there would ever be the same again.

We sat silently. Monique spoke first, softly. —Now, I understand why I like you.

I stood up. —I must go.

We walked to the door, not speaking. The night was quiet

and still. Monique gave me her hand. It was small and soft.

—Monique, in America we have a custom called the good-night kiss, I said.

She looked up slowly. Her voice was low.

—It is the custom in many countries.

—May I kiss you, Monique?

In the moonlight her eyes were soft. —I should like you to. Her lips were as soft as I had thought.

I had never seen the moon so bright.

I stopped time after time

Just to stand,

Looking up at it.

I felt . . . but what can I say?

I wanted to kill dragons . . .

And I wanted to run a race . . .

And I felt that the whole wide and starry universe

Had made

Me

Its center.

Me!

Never had I loved anybody before—

Or since.

SEVEN

I lived for my week-end passes. During the week I went through the motions of eating and sleeping. I even fought a war, on the infrequent occasions when Jerry showed himself in the quiet valley. But I did not come alive until I climbed aboard a six-by-six and it went twisting and turning down the narrow mountain road to Nice. I would soak in the tub at the Officers' Club, dress and literally run up the road to the villa. I never arrived there breathing normally.

Both Monique and her mother were always delighted to see

me. They served my favorite dishes, set aside delicacies until I arrived. I always felt that I had arrived home. I helped Monique with her gardening and did chores around the house for Mrs. Blair. We sat for hours, Monique and I chattering, while Mrs. Blair watched us with her level, kind old eyes.

Mrs. Blair and I understood each other. While she still never smiled, sometimes as she passed she would give me an affectionate rap with her cane or, understandingly, always excused herself early so I could be alone with Monique.

On my third visit, I proposed to Monique. My heart dropped when I saw her genuine amazement. —But you scarcely know me, Sam.

—I know I love you. What else is there to know?

She smiled softly and put her hand on mine. —Thank you, Sam. It is . . . it is a great compliment. But I cannot.

—Why?

She looked in my eyes a long time. —I do not love you, Sam.

—I love enough for both of us, I said.

She shook her head slowly. —That can never be true, Sam.

—I'll make you love me! I said firmly.

She studied my face and said seriously, —Yes, Sam . . . please do.

We were together constantly. We laughed and ate and argued and walked for hours at a time. She was twenty-four but in many ways she was a child. In other ways, she was as wise as time. I know now that most women, if they are honest or decent, one or the other, have this quality. But she was the first to reveal it to me. Yes, she was a revelation.

I treasured every smile, every expression, fondled every moment we were together.

Once I took her dancing in Nice. But we didn't care for it much. There was too much drinking, too much open leering, too much desperation confined in too small a place.

On the way home, she sighed. —It is very sad.

—Oh, they're having a good time, I said.

—No, it is not true.

—Well, they think they're having a good time, I said.

—No. That is what is so sad.

I shrugged. —Well, that's the way soldiers behave, anyway.

She nodded. —Yes, I know. I do not blame them. If I were a soldier I would do the same. I would drink cognac until I got drunk and shatter my glass and cry *merde!* along with the others. Why are you not like that, Sam?

I smiled. —It isn't nobility.

—What is it then?

—Well, it's . . . oh, I don't know . . . it's all too involved.

—Try to explain to me, she demanded. —I must know!

I tried to think of a way to explain. —It's . . . it has something to do with the way I was reared, I suppose. When people look for release they want to do something different . . . blow off steam doing something they're not accustomed to doing. Soldiers are insecure. They're afraid of getting hit—or they just want to escape the job they're doing. Most men aren't used to that insecurity. But I've had it all my life. Maybe it's because I was an orphan. Maybe I was just born that way. When I was a kid I would sometimes walk through the streets at night, looking at the houses all lit up, sometimes even stopping to look through the windows at families sitting around, kids getting their lessons while their folks sat back listening to the radio. I wanted a home. I wanted one more than I wanted money or fame or food. And, after I grew older, more than I wanted whiskey or a woman . . . or a cigarette. I've always wanted to belong, I guess. You and your mother have made me feel that I do.

She put her face up and kissed me. She snuggled against my shoulder and sighed.

—I'm glad you are going to make me fall in love with you.

Once she took me to visit some of her friends—acquaintances, really. They were French, young, earnest. The girls wore heavy-rimmed glasses and almost no make-up. The men were young and pale and wore their hair long, and their dark eyes were bright. I didn't belong and was uncomfortable. They talked about Gide and Franck and Inconnu and tried to strike some sparks off me by discussing politics before they gave me up as a bad job. They listened rapturously to some records of classical music, then, I thought, made rather too much to-do over some American jazz records.

When we left, Monique said, —You were very glum. You did not enjoy yourself.

—Oh, sure I did, I said.

She was miffed. —No, you did not. Do not lie to me. If we are to be friends, you must not tell me lies.

I smiled and took her arm.

—I just don't understand people like that, I said.

—What about them is so difficult to understand?

—I don't know what they're talking about half the time, for one thing.

—You found them too intellectual?

—I wouldn't know an intellectual if one bit me.

—You did not know any intellectuals in America?

—No, I guess I didn't really. I used to think I read some intellectuals . . . but later I found that wasn't true.

—Who did you think was an intellectual?

—Well, Thomas Wolfe for one. I read everything he wrote. I almost cried the day I read that he had died. I felt I knew him so well. I thought that he was an intellectual because he made me think about . . . well, about things I had never thought about before. He made it seem all right for me to like things the other guys laughed about. It was a shock to me when I found out that the critics didn't think he was an intellectual at all; they thought he was anti-intellectual.

—They were wrong. He was an American intellectual, she said firmly.

—Thank you, I said.

—Wolfe thought that intellect was man's supreme faculty—he showed it in every word he wrote. It is true that he was a passionate man, an oddly passionate man, but being an intellectual does not mean that one abandons everything except intellect. It means that one uses the intellect to guide one's other faculties. Europeans seem to understand that better than Americans do. You could be an intellectual if you wished.

—No, thank you.

—And why would you not like to be?

—I don't want to be like those guys tonight, waving my hands and swaying to music with half-closed eyes and looking like a choking calf.

Her eyes flashed. —And what is wrong with showing one's

appreciation for music? It is permissible. They were only enjoying themselves.

—If they enjoy food, do they have to slobber and smack and let it run down their chins?

She put her hands to her mouth and burst out laughing. Oh, Sam, you are so wonderfully American.

—Well, what's wrong with that?

She gave my arm a squeeze and smiled up at me.

—There is nothing wrong with it. It is only that Americans have a quality I sometimes find strange.

—What quality?

—It is . . . it is almost an obsession to hide their true feelings. Is it not strange that most people do not realize that? Americans have a reputation for being blunt and candid. They will show enthusiasm. They will become boisterous and swagger and fight. And yet . . . no people are so reticent to show their tender emotions. It is almost a conspiracy among American men. They seem to feel that any emotion, except anger, is effeminate, not manly.

I grunted. —You want us to weep and gush?

—That is what I mean. No, I should not like you to gush. Weep, perhaps . . . sometimes, when it is time to weep. It is the British who are supposed to hide their emotions. But they seem to have developed a better sense of proportion and hide only the unpleasant ones. Even the Germans . . . they are brutal and matter-of-fact, but they can still stand humble before beautiful things.

I grunted again, sarcastically.

She nodded solemnly. —It is true. I see American soldiers on the street and sometimes I see them looking at buildings or sculpture and I can see by their faces that they are impressed. But what do they say? They say, "Some pile of rock eh, Mac?"

I laughed and she smiled back.

—It is true. Once I was walking on the hill, at sunset. It was one of the most beautiful sunsets I had ever seen. The sun was almost touching the water, and it was enormous, bright orange. The sky was tinted with all the colors of the spectrum, streaked with beautiful rays which took one's breath. I passed two American soldiers, standing by the wall on the hill, staring at

it, transfixed, not moving. And I heard one of them say very softly, "Boy! Some egg yolk!"

We laughed.

—I have to . . . to keep reminding myself that Americans have that quality. Otherwise, I would never understand them. I remember when I was a child, Father and I were looking at a book and we came to a colored photograph of a beautiful canyon which is somewhere in America. It was breath-taking, with pink spires and red rock turrets and it looked deep enough to swallow up the whole of the Alps. And underneath the photograph it said, "This chasm was discovered by Ebenezer Bryce, who, on viewing it for the first time, said, 'A mighty tough place to find a stray cow!'" When I read it aloud, my father laughed, but I was very angry. I said, "He must have been a stupid man!" But my father said, "Monique, you cannot always judge a man by what he says unless you see his face."

I smiled. —Your father sounds as if he was very wise, Monique. What was he like?

She waited a long time before she answered. —He was good and kind and honest. He was sternly honest about everything—even little things. Once when I was quite small he took me to the Louvre and I found a five-centime piece on the floor. I was delighted and wanted to keep it, but he insisted that we walk to a police station and hand it in to the gendarmes as if it had been a fortune. He was like that about everything. He was sensitive and proud and good and he never compromised, never in his life.

—You must look like him more than you do your mother.

She spoke slowly.

—I hope that is so. I hope I can resemble him in all ways. I loved him very much.

She looked at me and studied my face. —Sam . . . I should . . . She stopped.

—Yes?

Her face was serious. —I . . . She paused again. Let us go home, she said finally.

—But it's still early. Let's stop for a drink, I protested.

—Mama will be lonely, she said.

Her face was serious all the way back to the villa.

Sometimes we went out to dinner. Our favorite place was a small café facing the quay at Villefranche, owned by a buxom, smiling old French woman named Madame Brizeux. I used to raid the pantry at the Officers' Club for a pound of butter. We would take it to Madame Brizeux and then walk down to the quay to buy a couple of pounds of small, silvery sardines from the fishing boats. Madame Brizeux would fry them in the butter, heads and tails, and sometimes, I suspected, entrails, until they were crisp enough to eat whole. She served us dry white wine and large salads and bustled around giving us special treatment.

She drank Pernod constantly. After we had finished eating, she always joined us for a glass.

She would beam at us, and she always asked the same question.

—You are lovers, yes?

We smiled at each other embarrassedly until we began to accept it as a customary greeting.

Monique would always smile at her and say, —No, Madame, we are friends.

Madame Brizeux would click her tongue, shake her head, sip her Pernod, and say, —It is too sad.

When we left, she always came from behind the marble-topped bar to shake our hands. Her good-by was always the same.

—I wish for you a great love!

We had been to Madame Brizeux' several times when one day I noticed that the tables in the back were occupied by couples, sitting there idly, sipping apéritifs. From time to time, a man would approach one of the tables, have a short conversation with the woman. She would get up casually and lead him upstairs. I wondered what the men had asked to see.

After we had left the café I asked Monique about the women.

—They are prostitutes Madame Brizeux employs, she said. I stopped.

—What! Madame Brizeux keeps . . . keeps prostitutes?

—Why, yes, it is part of her business.

—Then who are the men who sit with the women?

She shrugged. —Their lovers, I suppose. Men who live off them.

I felt my ears burn.

She saw my embarrassment. We were going down the steps to the dock. She laughed and, standing on the step above me, turned me around by the arm. She was smiling but her level eyes were tender.

—Dear, sweet Sam, she said. She shook her head. —Are you really as innocent as you pretend?

I smiled at her.

—Maybe . . . or maybe I'm just a hypocrite. Sometimes I'm even shocked when I see people doing things I do myself.

She nodded and her eyes had a faraway look.

—Yes, I know how that can be.

We walked down the steps onto the dock. She held my arm and matched my strides. Suddenly she said, —Did you know I am a virgin?

I burst out laughing.

—Well, hurray for you!

—Thank you, she said solemnly. Then she noticed my laughter. She tried to tug her arm away.

—You make the joke, she said.

I held her arm and grinned at her. —Yes, I make the joke.

—A joke, she corrected herself, primly.

She looked at my grinning face a moment, smiled herself, and took my arm and we resumed walking.

—I thought you might like to know. We are friends and we should understand each other.

I pressed her arm with mine.

—I am glad to know, I said. —You must be the only twenty-four-year-old virgin I've ever met . . . especially in France.

We walked a few steps silently.

—It is not because there is anything wrong with me, she said quickly.

I laughed. —I didn't think there was.

She ignored my laughter, studiously studying the long steps she was taking to match mine.

—Someday when I fall in love I will love with all my heart . . . all my soul . . . and all my body.

I grinned.

—Now who's being youthful?

—What is youthful about it?

—It's . . . well, it just is, I said.

—You mean it's trite?

—Well . . . yes.

—I meant it to be, she said.

—We walked for a while without speaking.

—I would not marry a man until I made love with him first, she said suddenly, firmly, as if I would disagree.

—Good for you, I said.

—Would you marry a woman to whom you had not made love?

—Yes.

She stopped and looked up at me.

—You, I said.

She flushed. —But that is not . . . that is not what I was trying to say. I don't love you—that way. You are my friend.

—All right, friend, why wouldn't you marry a man you loved until you had gone to bed with him?

—Because . . . because I do not think I could be positive I loved him until then. And I should want to see him angry, very angry.

—What would that prove?

—It would show me the person he is . . . the real person. Anger strips away all disguises. Did you know that? she mused. —But I should not like a man who could not get very angry. I should want him to boil like Jove.

I smiled. —It would frighten you to death.

—Perhaps, she said. —Perhaps it would frighten me . . . but I think women like to be afraid of men they love. They will not say it is so, but it is true.

—Boo! I said.

She laughed and hugged my arm tightly and raised her face like a child.

—You do not frighten me. You did at first, but then I did not understand you. You are a gentle man, Sam . . . and I think . . . I think few people understand that.

—Maybe I'm just that way with you, I said.

She looked solemnly out to sea.

—Perhaps, she said quietly.

—Maybe I shouldn't be.

—Perhaps you shouldn't be, she said slowly.

Her face was sad, brooding. —I think . . . I wish I could find someone who needed me. Someone to whom I am necessary.

—I need you.

She shook her head. —No, no. You are self-sufficient. You do not need anyone. She sighed. —I know I am very weak, but there must be someone who needs me very much. I have depended on others all my life. I should like to find someone who would depend on me. I feel . . . sometimes I feel my life is useless.

Her mood disturbed me. I had never seen her look so sad. —Here, here! You shouldn't say things like that.

—Why should I not?

—Because . . . well, because it's unhealthy. It's . . .

—You mean it is morbid.

—Yes, it is.

—Yes, I know. I have a morbid dependency. Since I was a child, I have depended on others. Now I am a woman and I realize how very much I have missed . . . how many things I need to do to make me whole. Is it not sad to be my age and have missed so much? I wish to get drunk and to fall in love and to laugh gaily.

I grinned at her. —Well, when do we start?

She looked up at me solemnly a moment before she smiled. She hugged my arm tightly and rubbed her head against my shoulder. It reminded me of the way I had seen her rub her head along the arm of her mother's chair. —Dear Sam, she said, am I not a fool not to fall in love with you?

EIGHT

Near the end of September our peaceful vigil over the valley came to an abrupt end.

Britt and I were lying on our backs in the OP one bright morning when I heard a distant *thunnk, thunnk*. It was almost like the sound of an ax biting into soft wood. We exchanged

puzzled glances and sat up to hear better. Almost instantly, there was a rattling, humming *thaang* over our heads, as if a monstrous spring had broken loose from its moorings. A gigantic shell came hurtling down and exploded ten yards away with a roar that deafened us and half-blinded us with drifting powder smoke. We gritted our teeth and clutched the side of the OP as more poured in. It was impossible to talk, almost impossible to see. The sides of the OP were made of heavy concrete, but the top was open and rocks the size of our fists rained in and pounded us on the back. One of the first shells ripped up our telephone wires. Shrapnel or rocks sent flying by the burst of another snapped off the slender aerial to our radio.

We lay there helpless. It would have been impossible to give a fire mission even if we had dared raise our heads. Between the steady, deafening bursts, I could hear groans and screams, yells for medics. We held to the smooth walls trying to keep our balance, fighting for breath because of the heavy smoke. The shells dropped with frightening regularity. They would shift away for a few yards occasionally. But always, before we could relax, they would be back again, shaking the ground, rattling our teeth. Finally we didn't care any longer. We simply lay there, gasping, looking into each other's tight faces. The worst of the barrage lasted three hours, but it went on intermittently until darkness fell.

Finally we were able to crawl from our holes. We were shaken and groggy, coughing, ears ringing and eyes red-rimmed. Craters pock-marked the top of the hill. The infantry position around us had suffered worst. Torn bodies were everywhere.

All that night we carried our dead and maimed down the mountain. Orders came through for us to sandbag all positions, sides and bottom. About midnight a work party brought up bags and we worked feverishly to pack them with dirt and gravel and put them in place. While we worked all of us wondered what weapon Jerry had used. None of us had ever encountered it before.

I heard a group of infantrymen discussing it nearby. —It's one of them secret weapons—the kind Hitler's been talking about, one said.

—What do you think it is, Britt? I asked.

He shook his head. —I don't know. I know it's big.

—It sounds a little bit like a mortar, and the shells lob in like mortar shells, but it couldn't be a mortar because there aren't any mortars that big.

He rubbed his chin. —Maybe it's a catapult of some sort. He shook his head.

At 0300 there was a call for officers to report to the CP. The colonel's face was grim.

—We've been hit hard, he said. —They caught us with our pants down. It shouldn't have happened, but it did. It's my responsibility—no one else's. I've asked for replacements. We should be getting them tomorrow.

He turned to a map.

—Now, follow this. We know what they're using. They are mortars. Big ones—105's. They've got plenty of them and they know how to use them. We've got to knock them out. We know they're not in the town proper. We've timed the interval between the report and the explosion and we know they're somewhere on the floor of the valley. In this periphery—he made a sweeping motion—in the forward end of the valley.

—I want you to spot them. Keep OP's manned day and night until you find them. Report anything you see to your observers. Don't overlook anything. You observers will precede all fire missions against suspected mortar positions with the word *smash*. The word is *smash*. Artillery will know what to do when they hear it. Sandbag all positions, check all positions to be sure they are properly placed. Do it tonight. Do it as soon as you return.

In the dim light he scanned our faces.

A captain asked, —What were our casualties?

—Fourteen dead, three of them officers; twenty-seven wounded, seven officers.

There were no more questions.

At the first light of day, we began scouring the valley with our glasses. They were still firing periodically, and we were all confident that it would be only a matter of time until we located them. They were too thick, too close to escape detection for long. But as the morning wore on, we looked at each other bewilderedly, helplessly. Even though I risked my neck during two brief barrages to keep scanning the valley, I didn't

see a drift of smoke or a muzzle flash. The valley looked as serene and unchanged as ever, windows to the quiet houses shining like mirrors in the sunlight.

Britt and I split our sector into small sections and swept every yard with our glasses, carefully and constantly. He didn't find a thing. The only Jerry I saw all day was Snigglefritz. When he started on his morning run, I followed him with my glasses until I heard a distant *thunnk, thunnk, thunnk* and three shells hit close enough to deafen us and jounce us around in the OP like bugs in a matchbox. I lay back and roundly cursed Snigglefritz and the whole German Army.

For three days and nights we took a pounding. Ambulances made a regular morning run to pick up our dead and wounded. Never once did we spot a mortar. Worse still, Jerry had our positions zeroed in perfectly. If an observer raised his head too high, or a man made a dash across the brow of the hill, mortars came humming and rattling in within a few seconds. We grew hollow-eyed and nervous. The only Jerry we ever saw was Snigglefritz. He made his morning dash as usual, tearing up the dusty road on his bicycle. We began to hate him. Before he had been amusing; now he represented the enemy who was blasting us to bits.

On the fourth afternoon orders came through to abandon all positions on the hill except OP's. The infantry company which had been dug in on the flanks of our OP was ordered to withdraw to a small, rocky gorge about a hundred yards to the rear. They drew back that night. There was only the usual quota of curses and rattling of gear as men slipped on rocks, but it was enough. All hell broke loose.

Every mortar in the valley began to pound us methodically. We heard the infantry dash for cover, but Britt, Anderson, Harmer and I lay in a jumble on the floor of the OP and tried to burrow our bodies into the hard surface. We had four direct hits on the OP. Each time the concussion picked us up bodily and threw us together in a tangle of arms and legs. The bags we had placed on top of the OP were blasted open, and dirt and gravel poured in on us. Fragments of stone rained down and clanked against our helmets. We were almost strangled by the dust and biting powder fumes. Pieces of shrapnel fluttered through the openings. One blistering fragment the size of a

silver dollar somehow dropped softly between Harmer's shoulderblades. It was several weeks before we could laugh at how he said in a strained voice,

—They done got me, the bastards.

The barrage finally lifted but all that night Jerry threw in an occasional shell. The next morning we stared at each other, red-eyed and grimy. Even after the sun came up, we were stiff and sore.

The other men were huddled against the walls and I was peering down into the valley with my glasses in one hand and picking at a can of congealed C-rations when I saw Sniggelfritz. The sight of his dumpy figure made me so furious that my hands began to tremble.

I cursed him roundly, then turned to Anderson.

—Fire mission!

None of them looked up. They knew it was Sniggelfritz. Slowly, almost resentfully, Anderson reached for his microphone and began to call Fire Direction Center.

—Sugar Four calling Sugar One. Over.

The radio crackled.

—Go ahead, Sugar Four. Over.

Anderson looked up bored.

—Enemy approaching Checkpoint 14, I snapped.

I turned back while Anderson transmitted and watched Sniggelfritz wheeling up the road so blithely. I remembered the shells and the horror of the night before—the dead and wounded we had been carrying down the mountain. I could gladly have torn him to bits with my hands. If they didn't fire . . . if they didn't fire . . .

There was the usual bland query from the radio.

—Sugar One to Sugar Four, identify your target. Over.

Anderson looked at me reproachfully. I paused and took a deep breath.

—Enemy armored column! Fire at my command!

The men looked up unbelievably. Big grins split their grimy faces. They looked so fiendish that for a moment I was almost ashamed of myself. But then I turned and fixed Sniggelfritz' speeding bicycle in my glasses and I hated his guts.

Britt and Harmer came to stand by my side while Anderson intoned, —Enemy armored column. Fire at my command!

There was a long silence from the radio, broken only by its hum and crackle.

Finally a brisk voice said, —Sugar One to Sugar Four. We are giving you Div-Arty on your target. Acknowledge. Over.

We looked at each other and gulped.

—Oh, mama! Anderson said in an awed, frightened voice.

Div-Arty meant Division Artillery. I would be directing the fire of every piece of artillery we had dragged ashore, to say nothing of the sizable naval fleet which was giving us support from off shore. It was obvious some brass hat had decided from my phony report that the enemy was advancing in force.

I hesitated. Britt saw what I was thinking.

—Wow! You're in too deep to change it now, boy.

I was surprised to find my voice so calm.

—Acknowledge. Tell them again it's at my command. And tell them to step on it.

Anderson said, —Sugar Four to Sugar One. I am firing Div-Arty. Fire at my command. And hurry it up, will ya? Over.

Our grins faded and we looked at each other. Anderson unraveled the extension cord on his microphone and came to stand with us. His voice was still awed.

—What'll happen, Loot?

I shook my head and put my glasses back on Sniggelfritz. We all put our glasses on Sniggelfritz. He was about a quarter of a mile from Checkpoint 14. As usual, his head was bent low over the handle bars and his short legs were churning madly. I could see the sunlight dancing on the bicycle spokes. There was still no sound from the radio except a low hum and occasional crackle. I tried not to think about all the activity I had touched off—how gunners were turning cranks and fiddling with levers on rapid-fire little 90's, half-tracked 105's, long-barreled 155's, ponderous 240's, and the guns on the ships. I swallowed hard. Sniggelfritz was entering the last curve before the straight stretch on which Checkpoint 14 was located. If I didn't get a go-ahead signal within a minute or so it would be useless to fire. I began to think how to phrase a report that the enemy had withdrawn. The radio broke silence suddenly.

—Sugar One to Sugar Four. Ready on your target. Over.

—Stand by, I said.

I was only dimly aware that Anderson was transmitting my

message. I wondered if I hated Snigglefritz as much as I thought. Just then, there was a hollow *thunnk* from the valley. A shell roared in and landed thirty yards away. I knew then that I did. I ducked automatically with the others, but I didn't miss a turn of Snigglefritz' legs. He had left the curve and was headed down the straightaway. I gave him fifty yards more, ticking them off in my mind. My voice was hoarse and unnecessarily loud:

—Fire!

—Fire! repeated Anderson.

There was a long, long pause. Snigglefritz had already passed the spot I had fixed in my mind as the dead center of Check-point 14 before the first one passed overhead. It was a big one, swishing along lazily, sounding like the tires of a slow-moving truck on wet pavement. It was followed seconds later by another—and another—and another. We lost all count. The first shell was 'way off. It hit beside the road at least seventy-five yards ahead of Snigglefritz. He braked so quickly that his bicycle skidded sideways and he was enveloped in dust trailing in his wake. It was probably his last conscious move. Because, then, the whole quarter-mile section of straight road dissolved in a cloud of dust and smoke, with, here and there, towering geysers of dirt kicked up by the big shells. Shells were still swishing and chugging over our heads. A few seconds later, the sound made by the pieces as they fired reached us. It was a great, angry, rumbling roar, as if all of Southern France had exploded. None of us spoke. None of us moved until the last shell passed overhead. The road was obliterated by smoke and dust, which was climbing higher and higher.

Then we looked into each other's dirty faces for a moment and broke into wolfish howls of glee. We laughed so hard we fell to the floor and thrashed about.

All that week the terrible barrage continued. But, fortunately, our casualties dropped considerably. The infantry lay low in its new position, and, except for an occasional and obviously stray shell, it was comparatively safe. The OP continued to take a pounding periodically. Daily we grew more hollow-eyed, dirtier, more miserable. Our nerves were frayed, and the lowest cough, the slightest unexpected movement caused us to jump

and snap at one another. Finally, in desperation, I decided it would be better if we split into two teams, so we could, at least, have a few hours every day to relax and bathe and shave.

Working at night in pairs, we built a dugout on a small hill a hundred yards behind the OP, on the slope away from the valley. We shored it with timber, covered it with sandbags and sealed it with flattened C-ration cans. Thereafter, we rotated OP duty, with either Britt or me keeping watch with Anderson or Harmer. Within a few days, it seemed impossible that we had ever been able to get along without the dugout. Infantrymen slipped over for games of blackjack or draw poker. We made a couple of washbasins out of helmets, and, inevitably, the walls were soon plastered with pin-up girls.

We scanned the valley until it almost felt as if our powerful glasses were pulling our eyes from their sockets. There was not a sign of the mortars. Now that Sniggelfritz was gone, we didn't see a single Jerry. We didn't spot a shovelful of fresh-turned dirt, see a movement in the hedgerows or woods. We began to pound everything systematically. It helped some. Jerry didn't fire as often, but when he did, he had as many mortars as ever.

There were no passes that week end. It gave me another reason to hate Jerry, to intensify my already painstaking search of the valley. I spent Saturday afternoon in the OP, sitting dejectedly against the wall and thinking about Monique when I wasn't relieving Britt on the glasses.

He turned and shook his head in disgust.

—I give up. Wherever they are, they're dug in too well to see them from this angle.

Two shells came rattling in. We hit the ground automatically, lay there until the ground stopped trembling. Britt stood up, cursing bitterly.

—If I could just slip up behind them—just for five minutes!

I looked at him thoughtfully, took the glasses from him and searched the familiar landscape again. Without realizing it, he had made a point. I could see dozens of places which we simply couldn't see from our position, the rear of tall hedgerows, the areas behind houses and barns. I didn't see how Jerry could bear on us from those positions but anything was worth a try.

When the colonel came up that afternoon for his daily visit, I had a plan. I took out my map and showed it to him. —Why

not let Harris and me take a radio and slip over to this ridge? I asked, pointing to a position to our right.—It would give us a new perspective and we might see something, maybe the back edges of camouflage nets or emplacements behind buildings.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

—You would be going pretty close. That's 'way over the line of defense.

—We could lay low. Two of us could do it.

He looked at the map some more.

—It might be worth a chance, he said finally. I'll make a report in your name and send it in to G-3.

For the next several days, I asked him about the plan every time I saw him, but like most reports from the field, apparently, it had drifted into the Army's limitless channels and gotten lost. I forgot about it.

On Tuesday I received a letter. I thought there was some mistake at first. I had not had a letter since I had been overseas. But when I held the blue envelope in my hand and saw my name in her small, neat backhand and realized it was for me, I had to fight to keep from making a fool of myself in front of the men. I crawled into the dugout and tore it open eagerly. There were five pages . . . five whole wonderful pages. It was chitchat mostly, an account of what she had been doing, the flowers she had planted, comments on a book she was reading. But I devoured every line hungrily, read it over and over again, especially the last paragraph:

Mama and I were disconsolate when you did not come. You have no idea how dear you have become to us, how we look forward to your visits. On Sunday afternoon, I climbed the hill and sat for hours on the flat rock which you insist on calling an OP. I thought about you very diligently, dear, dear Sam, and if you did not realize it, there is nothing to the theory of mental telepathy—or else you are an insensitive brute! Please do come soon to see,

Your affectionate friend,
Monique.

Mrs. Blair had added a postscript in her angular hand:

Sammy, I had steak and kidney pie for you. I suspect the steak came from a mule, and Heaven only knows where the kidneys came from, but I know you would have enjoyed it!!

Aff'y,

Helen Blair.

I memorized the letter. I tucked it into my jump-jacket pocket, and for days I gloried in its comforting feel and in the darkness held it close to my face and hungrily sniffed the faint scent it carried of my love.

As men always do in war, after a week we had grown accustomed to our new way of life. We still hadn't found the mortars, but our casualties had reached an irreducible minimum—direct hits or men caught in the open while traveling between positions. It became increasingly obvious that Jerry was not using the mortars as a prelude to an attack. Weekend passes were resumed.

I was treated as a conquering hero. Monique's eyes clouded when she saw my drawn face and Mrs. Blair plied me with snacks until I protested—but it was Heaven. We sat and talked for hours, Monique curled up with her head on the arm of her mother's chair. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

They already knew about the new attack. A curfew had been declared in Nice for the first three days, and everybody knew about the heavy casualties flooding the hospitals.

—What do you do . . . when they start shooting at you like that, Sammy? Mrs. Blair asked.

I grimaced. —Eat dirt mostly—and pray.

—Does praying help?

—Well, I'm still here, I said.

She grunted thoughtfully. There was a short silence.

—Why don't you shoot them back? she asked.

I smiled. —We do what we can.

She thought about that for awhile.

—Good, that's what they understand. She stood up. —Have to take my nap now, Sammy. There are more cookies in the pantry. See you later.

—Yes, ma'am.

She tapped her cane thoughtfully.

—Sammy, don't shut your eyes when you pray.

I grinned. —No, ma'am.

She left the room and Monique and I looked at each other and smiled.

—She doesn't believe in prayer apparently, I said.

—Oh, but she does, Monique said. —She has her own way of praying. She says, "Forgive me, God. Thank you, God. Make me Thy servant." That is all. She says it is enough for anybody to say to God.

She smiled.

—Some of my governesses were horrified when they heard me say the same thing. They wanted to teach me other prayers, but Mama did not approve. She is very unorthodox—about everything.

I grinned. —Yes, I know.

I studied her face.

—You are not at all like her, Monique.

She smiled thoughtfully.

—I think I am, perhaps . . . in many ways, more than you realize. She has a strength that I lack, probably because I have never had to develop any of my own because we have always been so close. I do not know what I would do if I ever found myself in a situation where . . . where I could not depend on her.

—But I feel and believe as she does about most things, not only because she taught me, but because I truly believe them. Religion is a good example.

—And how do you feel about that—except for believing in short prayers?

She didn't smile. Her face was thoughtful.

—I believe all religions are good. Some are . . . are more attractive than others.

—Such as?

She paused a moment. —I should like to be a Hindu, I think.

—Oh no! I said.

She looked at me reproachfully.

—Why do you scoff? Do you know anything about Hinduism?

—Only about Yogis and sacred cows . . . and things, I said.

—Then you do not know. Did you know that to Hindus everything that exists, including our own selves, is God? There is a

great Oneness—and every stone, every blade of grass, every cloud in the sky, every flower, every dungheap, every beast and every savant, all are part of God. There is no “I” and no “thou”—we are only part of the harmonious whole which makes God. There is divinity in everything because everything is only a part of a divine whole. Our salvation depends on forgetting our individuality and flowing back to God as rivers flow into the ocean.

—We have various existences and whether we advance toward merging with God or sink downward depends on how we live during them. Life is not like a fast stream flowing along; it is a great pool in which we each exist until we find ultimate release.

—But that is only the attractive part, I said. —What about the superstitions and child brides and castes . . . and things like that?

—The superstitions and inequities and interpretations come from men. It does not change the basic belief.

—Well, I don't think I want to be converted to Hinduism. I don't want to be a part of everything else. I just want to keep on living and be Sam Loggins, a happy civilian, if I can.

—I am not afraid to die, Sam. Are you?

—If I'm not, I certainly give a good imitation of it sometimes, I said.

—No, no, I do not mean get killed in the war. That is different. That is what Shakespeare meant when he said even brave men fear the manner of their death. I mean I am not afraid simply to die, to . . . to disappear forever from the world. If I were ever hurt, so terribly maimed that life would be a burden instead of happiness, then I should like to die . . . to go to sleep. It would be easier.

Her face was serious, too serious. I put my hand to her cheek and tried to make a joke.

—You should have been a horse. They shoot horses.

—No, Sam, why do you always tease when I tell you how I feel? I do not mean hurt in body. I could be brave about that, I think. I mean being hurt inside me, being hurt so badly I knew I should not recover—ever.

—How would you know whether you would recover or not? Besides, it's cowardly.

—Why is it cowardly? she asked.

—It's cowardly to run away . . . to kill yourself rather than face things.

—I do not agree with you. My heart tells me it is not true. If one takes one's life to hurt somebody, simply to cause grief and remorse and keep the awful cycle complete, then it is wicked. It is very wicked. But it would not be wicked only to remove oneself.

—But what about people who love you? I asked. —It would hurt me if anything happened to you.

I smiled at her. —Stay with me and I won't let anyone hurt you.

She looked at me searchingly, smiled and put her forehead against my hand.

—I know, Sam, you are my dear, wonderful friend.

—Won't you marry me, Monique, please?

—I cannot, Sam.

—Why not?

—Because I do not love you—that way.

—How do you love me?

She smiled and studied my face.

—Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.

I grinned.

—Very pretty. Maybe you'll come kiss me instead.

She nodded. —That I can do.

She came and kissed me, tenderly.

—Sammy, said Mrs. Blair, wipe the lipstick off your chin.

We were at the dinner table. I could feel my face flush crimson as I picked up my napkin and rubbed my chin. Monique laughed.

Mrs. Blair looked at me levelly.

—Have you and Monique been lollygagging?

I grinned at her.

—No, ma'am.

She grunted. —Hasn't hurt your appetite, anyway. After a

moment, she asked, —What are you going to do after the war, Sammy?

—I don't know. I haven't had a chance to think about it much lately.

—Not going back to your job in the garage?

—No, ma'am.

—That's good, she said. There was a short silence.

—Do you have any ambition? she asked.

—I think so, I said.

I smiled.

—About some things.

She grunted. —Doesn't make any difference what it's about as long as you've got it.

She looked up. —Have I ever told you about the most ambitious man I ever knew in my life? His name was Chauncey Spanks.

—No, Mama, Monique said.

Mrs. Blair looked at her levelly. —That was his name.

—It couldn't have been! said Monique. She put her napkin to her mouth and laughed.

—His name was Chauncey Spanks, said Mrs. Blair firmly. He ran a livery stable. When he was young, sixteen or seventeen, his family was very poor, a shiftless lot, really. Well, Chauncey had a brother a couple of years younger and they had only one pair of shoes between them. They took turns wearing them whenever they had to wear shoes.

—Chauncey fell in love—really fell in love as hard as a young boy can with a girl who lived on the next farm. He was bashful, and shy about his ragged clothes. But he finally managed to get up his nerve to ask the girl to go to a church social with him. She accepted and he was delirious with joy.

—Well, on the night of the party, his brother dressed first and slipped out, wearing the only pair of shoes between them. As big as he was, Chauncey sat home and cried like a baby. When his brother finally got home, he jumped on him and thrashed the daylights out of him. He never spoke to his brother again.

—And the girl never spoke to Chauncey again. She wouldn't even look at him, much less listen to his excuses. A couple of years later, she married somebody else.

—Chauncey was never the same person after the night of that party. According to the way he told it later, he went out and stood under the moon and swore that if God would allow him to live, he would some day own the finest pair of shoes in the world. That was his whole ambition.

—What's more, he carried it out. He went to work in a livery stable, and with the first money he earned he bought a pair of shoes. He saved his money and after a while he bought a better pair. And then he bought a better pair. In a couple of years he was wearing custom-made shoes he ordered from England, even though he wore them with overalls and not too good ones at that.

—He was a hard worker and he prospered. After a few more years, he bought an interest in the livery stable. When the original owner died, he bought it outright. He could afford the finest shoes made by that time and he wore them but he wasn't satisfied. He had dozens of pairs, all custom-made, boots and oxfords and patent-leather pumps and every imaginable style.

—Finally, he started concentrating on one pair of shoes. He put ruby tips on the shoelaces first, then he began to add tiny jewels to the design in the toes. Then one day he heard about a firm that could metalize leather. He had the shoes plated with gold. He didn't wear them after that, but he kept them in a glass display case in his livery stable. Every time he got enough money he bought another jewel for his golden shoes. He never spent an unnecessary penny on himself. He put everything into those shoes.

—When I was a girl, he was an old man, bent and white-haired. He never married. Never looked at a woman as far as anybody knew. He lavished everything on those shoes. People came from miles around to look at Chauncey Spanks' golden shoes. He was a man who had an ambition and realized it.

She began to eat her dessert.

—But what happened to him? Monique asked.

—He died, Mrs. Blair said.

—What happened to the shoes? I asked.

—His brother inherited them—the shiftless one, the one who ran off with the first pair.

Monique and I burst out laughing. Mrs. Blair ate her des-

sert, wrinkling her nose from time to time, as she glanced up at us.

The next day we packed a picnic lunch and took it up to our favorite place on the hill. After we had eaten, I lay with my head in her lap while we looked out over the valley. The Alps were serene in the distance, bluish, capped with snow. It was hard to believe that Jerry was hiding beyond them with his killing mortars.

I looked up at her and sighed blissfully.

—I love you very much, I think.

She smiled and patted my cheek.

—You are lonely. Soon you will go away and forget all about me.

—Never!

—You will meet another girl.

—Never! Never!

She looked out over the valley for a long time, then sighed.

—Sam, have you ever been very deeply in love?

—I am in love! I said indignantly, starting to sit up.

She put her hand on my face and pushed me back again.

—I mean . . . well . . . I mean before?

I was still indignant.

—No!

—Never even a tiny bit?

—No.

She grinned and pushed my nose.

—It is impossible.

I smiled. —No, it's so. Oh, I've had crushes—kid stuff.

—Tell me about it, she said.

—Well, there was a girl I used to cut up a frog with.

—What! she said, laughing.

—No, really . . . this was in high school, see? In biology class. Two students were given a frog to dissect and this girl sat next to me because our last names began with the same letter.

—What was her name?

—Martha.

—And you were in love with her?

—As much as I was ever in love with anybody . . . before.

—But you were so young.

—What's that got to do with it? Kids fall in love. I'm not so sure they don't love more unselfishly than adults.

—Tell me about . . . about this Martha.

—Well, I guess I fell for her . . . I grinned—over the frog. Her father was a big shot, or at least he seemed like a big shot to me. He had a government job. She was pretty . . . and nice and . . . I shrugged.

—Did you tell her you loved her?

—I didn't have to.

—Why so?

—Oh, she knew. She liked me, too, but . . . well, I didn't quite belong in her crowd and I was too young to know what to do about that, so I just sort of wandered away . . . and finally forgot about it.

She sighed. —You are so lucky to have known so many people, to have gone to school with people of your own age. I should like to know people. Most of all I should like to know Americans. Why cannot you introduce me to some Americans?

—But I have.

—I do not mean those . . . those people.

—I'll bring one of the other officers to dinner sometime, I said.

—No, I do not mean officers. I should like to meet some . . . some common soldiers, so I can know Americans better.

—Look, I'm a common soldier. I've been an enlisted man longer than I've been an officer.

—No, no, you do not understand. I want to meet ordinary Americans. I do not want to meet men who have even become officers. You are—she groped for a word—you are Haves. I wish to meet Have-Nots.

I grinned and leaned up and kissed her serious face.

—I'm a Never-Had, I think.

—Why do you always tease? she said.

I made my face solemn.

—All right, I know a guy I can bring. But he's a very ordinary crude type, so don't be surprised. I had to smile again when I thought how bewildered she would be when she met Britt, if I could persuade him to come.

Just the two of us were in the dugout the next day when I asked him.

—Look, Britt, there's . . . er, a . . . a girl I'd like you to meet.

He grinned. —Your girl?

—Naw, naw, she's . . . well, a girl I know. She's a . . . real nice kid. She's got a mother and . . . well, I thought maybe we could have dinner and visit them next week end.

—Oh, no! You're not going to get me to date some girl's mother.

—Naw, you don't understand. Her mother's an old lady. We'll go to their house and have dinner. They're nice people, Britt, real high-class.

He sat grinning at me wisely, trying to decide whether I was pulling his leg.

—Where do they live?

—On the hill above Villefranche. I grinned back. —Really, Britt, it's not a gag. They're nice people, real nice people. You'll like them. I know you will.

He was still grinning suspiciously.

—Look, it won't hurt you to have a good meal and stay out of a booze joint for one night.

—What do we do after we eat . . . play mahjong or hide-the-thimble?

—Naw, naw, you've got it all wrong. These are real nice people, just like nice people at home. The girl . . . well, she's sort of an intellectual. She likes music and books and paintings, things like that.

—What's she look like?

—She's real pretty . . . black hair, brown eyes.

—I'll bet!

—Yes, she is, Britt, really she is. Aw, come on, you'll enjoy yourself.

He was still suspicious.

—All right, he said finally. —But if you're kidding me, Sam, you'd better watch out because I'll dampen your powder for sure.

NINE

I watched him closely as we entered the gate of the villa, grinning inwardly as I waited for him to gasp with amazement, be impressed. But he didn't change expression, glanced casually at the flower beds, and that was all. It made me realize the difference between us. It was only an ordinarily nice home to him, the kind of home he was used to visiting.

But I was able to enjoy Monique's surprise. She met us at the door. Her smile was bright, maybe a little extra bright, and I knew she was prepared to put some poor GI at ease. When she saw him, jaunty, confident, handsome, her smile dimmed somewhat. As I introduced them, she looked at me bewilderedly, questioningly, as if I were playing a joke.

Britt said the right thing. He always said the right thing. —You have a lovely view here, and I admired your flowers as I passed.

—Thank you. She paused, laughed and made a helpless little gesture.

—Do I call you Sergeant . . . is that proper?

—Call him Britt, I said.

She smiled at him in her direct way.

—Yes, Britt. That is an odd name.

He grinned.

—I'm an odd fellow.

Mrs. Blair was in the drawing room. She grunted, searched him with her eyes when he was introduced.

—So you're a sergeant? she asked.

He smiled. —That's right.

—Sergeants are supposed to be tough—are you tough?

He laughed, completely at ease. —Not very.

She grunted and studied him some more.

—Where's your home?

—Mississippi, he said.

—Town?

—Well, it's a small place, sort of a suburb of Jackson, really.

—Name?

—Childsville, he said, grinning.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully.

—A little below Doan's Landing.

—Why, yes, he said eagerly. —Do you know it?

Her voice was flat. —No.

That disconcerted him. He looked at us helplessly. Monique and I laughed.

—You must not mind Mama's questioning, Monique said.

Mrs. Blair grunted and wrinkled her nose.

—Should have been a lawyer, I suppose, she said.

But Britt was on his feet, looking toward the large painting over the mantel. —Say, isn't that a La Farge? he asked.

Mrs. Blair sounded almost pleased. —It is, Sergeant.

Britt had gone to stand under it.

—It's marvelous, he said. —It's truly a magnificent one. I own— He paused and made a deprecating gesture. —At least, my family owns a La Farge, but it's nothing to compare with this. He studied the painting.

—My husband acquired it, Mrs. Blair said. —It was his favorite.

Britt had shifted his glance to the other paintings. —And you've got a Turner, too, he said eagerly. He walked to another painting. —Why, this is wonderful!

Mrs. Blair grunted with satisfaction. Monique went to stand by him.

—Is it not lovely? she said. —My father bought it . . . for me.

Mrs. Blair rose. —I'll show you my favorite, Sergeant.

I watched them as they made a slow circuit of the room, discussing all the paintings, listening to Britt's eager comments. I laughed inwardly. They had just been pictures to me, but Britt . . . Britt was some operator.

Finally they came back and took their chairs, Britt and Monique in animated conversation, and even Mrs. Blair talking more than usual.

—I think they're all wonderful—beautiful, Britt said. —I ad-

mire your taste. It's such a relief after all the junk people hang nowadays. He grinned. —I'm strictly a Royal Academy type myself.

Monique finally remembered me. She smiled at me. —Sam is not so conservative. We saw a Miro last week and he was very intrigued. It is the first time I have ever seen him study a painting.

I felt my ears burn. —I was trying to figure out what it was, I said.

We all laughed.

—But you said you liked it very much, Monique said.

—The colors were pretty, I thought, I said. —It was . . . well, it was sort of exciting.

Mrs. Blair gave me a friendly tap on the knee with her cane. —That's what is important, Sammy. Don't be taken in by all the arty folderol.

He also amazed me later when Monique and I took him on a tour of the grounds. He knew all the flowers, which were her chief preoccupation. I had always only been able to agree that they were pretty. He made suggestions, soon had her deferring to him, asking him questions.

—You need better drainage in that bed of glads, he said.

—But I have gravel under the topsoil, she said.

—It isn't enough, the bottom spikes are browning at the edges.

I smiled at him skeptically.

—How do you know so much about flowers?

He grinned. —We have flowers in Mississippi. Why, man, he said, thickening his accent, the finest li'l ole flowers in all the world bloom in Missis'ip. Besides, he laughed, my mother used to give me fifty cents every Saturday when I was a kid to help her in our garden.

At dinner he was charming, witty, chatty. He and Monique hit it off together from the start. Only Mrs. Blair seemed to confuse him, throw him off his balance occasionally.

—How long have you been a sergeant? she asked.

—Four or five months. He grinned at me. —Sam got me the stripes.

Mrs. Blair looked at me.

—The Army's changed, I see. Do all sergeants call you Sam?

Britt laughed. —Oh, no! Not on your life!

I flushed. —Britt and I are especially good friends.

Mrs. Blair digested that slowly.

—Sam's tough, is he? she asked Britt.

Before he could answer, Monique said, —Sam is formidable. She smiled at me.

Britt grinned. —Yes, he is. There was a short silence, and he said, —Have you ever heard the story of the small Frenchman? He was only a little more than four feet tall, so tiny that he was a joke. To make it worse, for some reason, he was named Formidable. He was a sensitive, shy little fellow and he hated the name and the ridicule it caused. He tried changing jobs, changed his name to Alphonse, even moved to a different town, but the name followed him. People still called him Formidable. Most people, even those who scarcely knew him, didn't call him by any other name. He finally met a woman and fell in love. She was tall and buxom, at least twice as large as he was. She loved him dearly and they were devoted. Only she knew truly how much he despised his name, how it hurt him when people called him Formidable.

—Finally he died. She was heartbroken and she vowed she wouldn't put his hated name on his tombstone. Instead she had this carved, "Here lies a man who for twenty-five years was faithful to his wife."

—The grave was right on the edge of the cemetery, where people passing by could read the epitaph. And as they passed and read it, they always shook their heads and said . . .

—C'est Formidable! blurted out Monique.

She had anticipated the tag line and couldn't contain herself. I had never seen her so amused. Her eyes fairly danced with mirth. Her laughter was contagious. The three of us got the sillies and looked at each other and laughed until we were out of breath. Mrs. Blair sniffed and wrinkled her nose.

After dinner the three of us went to Madame Brizeux'. We chatted and laughed as we walked along, Monique holding both our arms and sometimes swinging her feet from the ground like a child.

We drank too much wine and laughed some more. Part of my enjoyment came from laughing at them. They seemed to share the same sense of humor, fall in easily with each other's jokes.

Madame Brizeux had a large, dignified black dog which sometimes wandered between the tables, begging for tidbits. He came up, sat down and solemnly put his paw on Britt's knee. Britt studied him seriously.

—This dog's name is Jean-François, he said finally.

—How do you know? Monique asked, also seriously.

—He told me, said Britt.

—Oh, said Monique.

I waited for one of them to crack a smile, but neither did. Monique put out her hand and patted the dog.

—Nice Jean-François.

His French was good, impressively good. He had learned a lot of French poetry in prep school and Monique knew everything he knew.

He would declaim:

—Waterloo! Waterloo! Waterloo! morne plaine!
Comme une onde qui bout dans une urne trop pleine, . . .

Monique would pick it up:

—Dans ton cirque de bois, de coteaux, de vallons,
La pâle mort mêlait les sombres bataillons.

I watched them enviously as they matched each other couplet for couplet.

He overwhelmed Madame Brizeux and we didn't leave until the place closed. On the way home, we sang "*Alouette*." At least, I knew that. It was a wonderful evening.

We went back the next day, and he and Monique spent hours in the garden replanting one of the flower beds. I sat with Mrs. Blair and listened to their laughter and chatter. Several times I wished that I could spend some time with Monique alone, but I was glad he was enjoying himself.

After we boarded the six-by-six and headed back to the mountains, I grinned at him.

—Well, it wasn't so bad was it?

—Bad! I hope not. It was swell.

—We'll have to do it again sometime, I said.

He smiled wisely.

—Look, I'm no dope. I've already taken care of that little matter. Monique has already invited both of us back next week end.

—Oh, has she? I said.

We went the next week end and every week end. We took a room in a small side-street hotel so we could be together. After a while the manager automatically reserved it for us. We didn't use the room much, except for sleeping. Most of the time we were up at the villa with Monique or wandering around exploring restaurants and small bars in Villefranche. We laughed and sang and joked with each other and teased Monique. For two days of every week the war seemed far away.

I still sometimes wished I had Monique to myself, but yet, on a few occasions, when it wasn't possible for him to get a pass, we both missed him. We found ourselves talking about him, laughing at things he had said.

Monique said, —I do not understand why he is just a sergeant when . . . when . . . She stopped.

I grinned. —When I'm an officer?

—What I am trying to say, she said, is that he is such a superior person, so knowledgeable.

—He sure is. He's a smooth operator, I said.

She looked at me quickly, resentfully.

—Why do you say that?

—Look, he's my friend, I protested. —I'm not saying anything about him I shouldn't. I just mean that he knows all the angles. He's a sharp boy.

—Is that wrong?

—Of course not. But . . . I sighed and smiled at her. —What I mean is that he's just one of those men who know their way around—no matter where they are. He's never at a loss.

Monique thought that over. —That is a good trait, I think.

I grinned. —Of course it is, if you don't play poker with him too often.

Our favorite haunt was still Madame Brizeux'. No matter where we went, we usually went by there for a nightcap. One night while he and Monique were having a discussion about something which didn't interest me, I grinned at them and went for a walk by myself on the quay.

After a few minutes I heard their voices as they started down to join me. They stopped in the shadows, and I saw him take her in his arms and kiss her. They stayed there for what seemed a long time. I watched them, stony-faced. I was angry, not furiously so, but still angry. When they walked onto the quay, laughing, I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what to say. I noticed that Monique had left her short evening wrap in the café.

—It's too chilly out here without a wrap! I snapped. —We'd better go back in.

—Oh, no, Monique protested.

—I'll get your coat, Britt said.

After he walked away, I turned to Monique.

—I saw that tender love scene between you two.

She put her hand on my arm, but gazed out to sea without speaking.

—Why did you kiss him? I asked.

—I wanted to, she said.

—Why, that's silly. You hardly know him.

—I know him, she said.

—You've only seen him a few times.

She smiled up at me.

—You kissed me the second time you saw me.

—Well, that's different . . . I'm . . .

—Why is it different?

—It just is.

—I feel as if I had known him all my life, she said slowly.

—Longer than for all my life . . . always.

—Don't be ridiculous.

She turned and faced me. Her face was serious.

—Sam, do you wish me to be happy?

—Of course, I do, but don't behave like a child. You're always so moody. Anyone would think you're in love with the guy.

—Sam, I think I am . . . I am not sure yet, but I think I love him very much, she said.

I looked out to sea and didn't say anything.

It hurt—it hurt very much.

Somehow things were never quite the same after that. It was

inevitable, anyway, I suppose. But I made it easier, hastened it. There were little things.

There was the episode of the wine. Britt was very particular about wine, knew a great deal about it. And like all people who do, he liked to show off his knowledge. Even at Madame Brizeux', he ordered carefully, had the inevitable little discussion. One night he insisted we go to dinner at a fine, swank small restaurant he had discovered in Nice. They knew him there, smiled and bowed him in as if he had been a general. After we had ordered, he and the maître d'hôtel had a discussion over the wine card. I watched them with growing irritation.

—Oh, for Pete's sake, order something and get it over with. It doesn't matter!

He looked at me with a quizzical smile.

In her serious way, Monique protested, —Oh, but yes it does, Sam! It will be very nice to have a good wine.

She smiled at Britt.

—I always have to order when Sam and I go out.

That rankled.

—It's all wine, isn't it? I asked.

—But, oh, no, Sam, she said.

I knew I was behaving like a fool, but I couldn't stop.

—It all tastes the same to me, I said.

Britt looked at me without saying anything. Anger flushed my cheeks. —That is because you . . . Monique began, but then she saw my face, sensed the tension. She shrugged.

The meal was not a success. I had spoiled it for them.

Then there was the joke he told in French one afternoon at Madame Brizeux'. Madame Brizeux was sitting with us, sipping her usual Pernod. She and Monique sat back and shrieked with laughter. I was resentful because I was left out.

—How about letting me in on it? I said.

Britt was laughing.

—I can't, he said offhandedly.

My voice was sharp. —Why can't you? They all stopped laughing and looked at me.

—Well, it doesn't sound quite right in English, Sam. It's sort of cute and naughty in French, but dirty in English.

—If you can say it one way, you can say it another, I said.

He looked at my set face and shrugged.

—All right, he said.

I've forgotten the joke, except it was something a man said as he walked upstairs behind a woman.

Nobody smiled as he told it in English.

—It sounds pretty dirty to me, too dirty to be telling! I snapped.

He shrugged again. —I told you it was.

—Well, let's don't have any more!

I had spoiled their joke.

They spent a great deal of time together in the garden, or in the pantry while he mixed Martinis. Sometimes I would feel Mrs. Blair's steady eyes on me, as I almost winced as I heard them laughing together. And when they came in, grinning and bright-eyed, and saw my face, they always grew solemn.

I seemed to put a pall over their gaiety.

One week end through some blunder by the battalion clerk Britt's name was left off the pass roster. He was still arguing when the six-by-six pulled out for Nice. Monique smiled gaily when she greeted me, but I saw the disappointment in her eyes.

That afternoon we walked up the hill to our spot and sat with our backs to the flat rock. It was almost like old times as we talked and argued and laughed. Suddenly she broke off in the middle of a sentence and I looked at her. She was looking down the hill and her eyes were shining with happiness. Britt's trim figure was trudging up the path. She sprang up and ran to him, waving and calling gaily. I sat back and thought about the light I had seen in her eyes. I had never been able to put it there.

I knew the truth then. But men like to delude themselves, particularly about women. I hung on for a while longer, but slowly, gradually, I pulled away. I always had another engagement, somebody to see, somewhere to go. They protested. They even made plans for all of us to go places together, but I was busy.

I was busy nursing a broken heart.

I wasn't bitter. In some ways, it was better after that. I had dinner at the villa frequently, always paid at least one visit to sit with Mrs. Blair. We found a lot to talk about. Lonely people usually have more in common than their loneliness.

Britt and I continued to share a room together in the small side-street hotel. We borrowed money from each other, laughed and joked together, and were friends. We also had something in common. I never mentioned it. But I knew I loved her more.

I had never seen Monique so gay, so vibrantly happy. Sometimes she met the six-by-six when it arrived, standing on tiptoes, calling gaily to us both, but with her shining eyes fixed on him. One day when she met us she was bubbling over. She grabbed both our arms as we started walking down the street.

—I have a surprise! A great surprise. Tomorrow we go to Antibes—all of us. I have arranged a car. We will swim in the beautiful sea and eat wonderful food and lie in the sun—all of us, she said.

—That's wonderful, Britt said. —How about it, Sam?

—Aw, I've got to see a fellow, I said.

Monique gave my arm an indignant tug.

—You always have to see a fellow—a guy or a fellow. We will not permit it!

I grinned, avoiding her eyes. But I refused to go, even though they took turns begging me. I saw them off the next morning, Monique driving the tiny French car she had somehow managed to hire. They both again pleaded with me, but before the car had turned the corner, they had forgotten I existed. It was a lonely day, one of the loneliest of many. I walked the streets and sat in bars and restaurants with other lonely men and, finally, returned to the room.

I awakened early. His bed was still empty. I knew I was behaving like a fool, but I couldn't help it. It ate away at me, slowly tore me to pieces inside, one tiny bit after another. I sat torturing myself, lighting one cigarette off another.

I still hadn't dressed when he came bursting in at ten o'clock. He was bright-eyed, bouncing with exuberance. He threw his arms wide and spun on his heel, grinning at me.

—Have a good time?

—The best, Sam! The best, my old friend, Sam! he exulted.

I didn't look at him.

—Car break down?

—No, we stayed . . . He stopped. —What do you want to know for? Why do you ask? he said joyously. He stood looking down at me, with a broad mischievous grin.

I tried to keep the harsh edge off my voice, but I didn't succeed.

—Britt, if you give that girl a snow job, I swear I'll . . .

He chortled with glee.

—I'm going to marry her!

I swallowed hard, managed a smile as I looked at his grinning face.

—Gee, that's swell, Britt. That's swell, guy!

—She's got to tell the old battle-ax first, he said. —But then it's official, boy! And you can be best man.

—Gee, Britt, that's swell . . . that's swell. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

I left him sleeping and went out and, numbly, started walking the streets. I finally wandered up to the Officers' Club and tried to sit in the sunshine and look at the magazines. But I was restless. Almost before I realized it, I was climbing the familiar road to the villa. I kept telling myself that it was silly, that she would be sleeping, that even if she wasn't, I would be intruding, going when I did. But I kept walking.

She wasn't sleeping. She was on the sun porch. When she saw me, she didn't smile. She got up and came to me and took my hand between hers and held it to her face.

—Dear, dear, Sam, I was hoping you would come.

I tried to manage a smile. —Britt told me, I said. —I . . . I want to tell you how happy I am for . . . you both. I stammered for appropriate words. —It's a good thing . . . I brought the guy around . . . I guess.

She hadn't moved her solemn eyes from my face.

—Yes, Sam, it was a very good thing. I am very happy.

—Well, I guess that's . . . that's all I wanted to say. I laughed nervously.

Her eyes seemed very dark and infinitely tender. —Sam, you are my dearest friend. You will always be my dearest friend. Don't ever think harshly of me, Sam, never, as long as you live. I have not . . . I did not mean for it to be this way, Sam. I would never hurt you.

—Aw, forget it, forget it. I tried to make a joke. —Some you win, some you lose and some get rained out.

Her eyes were still serious, searching my face. —You are not angry, Sam, not angry at all?

—Aw, naw . . . naw . . .

—Then my happiness is complete, she said. —Oh, Sam, I am so very happy. She burst into tears and buried her head in my chest.

I put my arm about her.

—Aw, come on . . . stop it! Stop it! I said.

It was the last time I ever held her close.

I was still awake when he came in that night. I had been awake for hours, staring into the darkness. But I shut my eyes and pretended I was asleep. He was drunk, reeling drunk, stumbling and muttering to himself. I wondered where they had been, why he picked that night of all nights to get so drunk. It took him a long time to get undressed, cursing at his boots, almost falling as he took off his clothes. But he was asleep, snoring softly, as soon as his head hit the pillow. It was almost dawn before I slept.

He opened one eye when he heard me dressing the next morning. I smiled at him.

—How did it go?

—It's off, he said.

—What's off?

—The wedding . . . everything, he said sharply.

I stared at him unbelievably.

—What are you talking about?

—I told you it's off . . . that's all—that's damned sure all! he almost shouted.

—Look, did you get drunk and make Monique mad?

—Just take my word for it. Everything's off and I don't want to talk about it.

—You've got to talk about it.

—The hell I do. It's off—and that's all I'm going to say.

He buried his head in the pillow and wouldn't look at me, wouldn't answer my questions.

TEN

I went up to see Monique that afternoon. Anna, the maid, opened the door.

—Madame is in the drawing room, she said.

Mrs. Blair was seated in her massive rocker with her foot propped up on the small stool. Her level old eyes searched my face.

—You have heard I suppose, Sam?

—Yes, ma'am, I said.

—What have you heard?

—Well, only that . . . oh, I don't know. I tried a smile.—I guess it's just a lover's spat.

It was a long time before she spoke. —No, Sam, it's not a lover's spat.

—Where is Monique? I asked. I'd like to talk with her about it.

—Monique has gone away, Sam.

—Where?

She didn't seem to hear my question. Her voice was flat. —Yes, Monique has gone away and I don't know when she'll be coming back.

—What's it all about, Mrs. Blair? My temper flared. —If he's done anything to hurt her, I'll . . . I stopped. —I love Monique, Mrs. Blair, I said. —You know I love Monique.

—Yes, Sam, she said, I do.

She sat looking at the floor, then she said quietly, —You've never seen a photograph of Monique's father, have you, Sam?

—No, ma'am, I said.

She sat thoughtfully a moment longer before she arose with some difficulty and went over to a walnut escritoire in the corner. She returned with a leather photograph folder. She

took her seat and held the folder closely, almost protectively, against her breast.

—Monique's father was a rare man, Sam, she said quietly. —I have never known another man like him. This picture was taken a year before he died.

She handed me the folder.

I opened it and I suppose I gasped. I must have. It was the face of a Negro I saw. It was an intelligent, sensitive face; high, rather narrow forehead framed by thinning, short gray hair, high cheekbones and a firm but full mouth. But it was the face of a Negro!

I sat speechless. Mrs. Blair took the folder back and again held it to her breast.

I stammered, —I . . . I didn't . . .

—No, Sam, she said,—you didn't know. She stared straight ahead. —He was born in the South, Sam . . . in Georgia. His mother was a washerwoman and he never knew his father. A little bit like you, Sam. He ran errands and swept floors and worked with a pick and shovel to work his way through Hampton Institute. He went to Philadelphia as a clerk for a Negro insurance company. By the time he was thirty-five he had his own company, a company that insured both Negroes and whites.

—I was a public health nurse when I was hired by the company. I traveled, mostly in the South where we had so many policyholders. I rode in steamers up and down the Mississippi and lectured and wrote reports and poked around in filthy, smelly little shacks and tried to tell those miserable God-forsaken creatures how to avoid the worst scourges like hookworm and malaria and pellagra. It was bold work for a woman in those days, Sam, a bold job and, sometimes, a thankless one. But I had always been a rebel, Sam. I had always shocked people. I suppose I still do.

—I didn't know the president of my company was a Negro until I was promoted and brought back to Philadelphia. He took more interest in the public health program of his company than any other department. He was always like that . . . wanting to do something to help people. Not just his people —all people. We worked together closely. And I fell in love with him. I didn't care whether his skin was black or red or

blue. I fell in love with him because he was the finest man I had ever met. And I was shameless about it. I schemed and I connived and I badgered and I pestered him until he had to marry me. I never . . . well, almost never . . . regretted it.

—It wasn't always easy, Sam. I found out what it was like to be . . . to be neither Negro nor white. My family never spoke to me again after my marriage. That wasn't much of a blow. They weren't very important people, Sam, middle-class drudges, soft nicey-nice people who had even been shocked when I became a nurse. All of them together weren't worth his little finger. But they were white and he was a Negro, so I died in their sight.

—You see a good many mixed marriages nowadays. Then you didn't. I had to get thick-skinned to slurs and insults and sneers from Negroes and whites alike. I didn't mind for myself. I had the man I wanted and together we were doing the work I loved. But I wasn't completely insensitive, Sam, and I made a vow that no child of mine would ever undergo heartbreak and misery because I made my own rules.

—I almost kept my vow. It wasn't until I thought I was too old to have a child—either because of a quirk of biology or fate . . . that I found myself carrying Monique. I have cried only twice since my childhood. The second time was when Lafayette died. But that was the first time. I cried for days. I tried not to let him know how I felt, but it was so difficult . . . oh, it was so difficult.

—He was always a rock. He knew things, Sam . . . he felt things, like nobody I've ever seen. One day he came home from the office and just as if nothing had happened told me that he had sold out his interest in the company. He had sold out the company he had spent his whole life in building for me. And, of course, for Monique.

—We came to France and began a new life. It was a good life. There were no racial barriers and if a Negro stood apart in any way, it was only as an interesting sort of oddity. Lafayette was so light-complected that we escaped even that.

—But parents transmit their feelings to their children and Monique was always a sensitive and perceptive child, like her father, so I suppose she always knew we were different somehow. But I don't think she ever had any genuine realization

of what being a Negro meant until she was sixteen or seventeen.

—I had always tried to explain as casually and simply as I could, but then, of course, she began to read more widely and for a while she had an almost morbid interest in the subject. A few years ago there was a vogue for praising every trashy novel on the Negro problem that came along. She devoured them all. I tried to explain that, sordid and unpleasant as the life of an American Negro can be, it was not as bad as the novels made out. I don't think she quite understood. She still doesn't. Sometimes it seemed she visualized the whole United States as one vast Ku Klux Klan.

—I was glad when you came along. You were the first American she had met more than casually. That first afternoon after you left she asked me questions for hours and I suppose she couldn't believe you were a typical American. The night you kissed her—yes, she told me. She came to my room a little frightened, but thrilled, too. She asked me if she shouldn't tell you about her father.

—I made a mistake then. I told her she shouldn't. I liked you, Sam, and I wanted you to like Monique. I knew she was lonely, cooped up here with only me for company. I wanted you to take her to dinner and laugh with her and—yes, I suppose I even wished for a mild romance. Monique has been a child too long. I didn't think either of you would grow serious. You are a soldier and I knew you wouldn't stay long. I didn't think you'd intrude on our lives.

—It didn't turn out that way, of course. With my years I should have known most things don't turn out the way they are planned. I didn't anticipate Britt. Even so, I wasn't disturbed at first. I may have even been glad that she was getting a chance to meet another American . . . a Southerner at that.

—I thought I knew my daughter, Sam. But I didn't know she had fallen in love with Britt until after they came back from Antibes. She told me that he had asked her to marry him.

For the first time I had known her, she showed emotion. She had to pause and hold her lips tight. When she spoke again, her voice cracked.

—I suppose I could have spared her some, Sam. I told her to tell him about her father. I . . . I didn't tell her what . . .

what to expect. Maybe it was because I prayed to God that it wouldn't matter to him. Or maybe it's because I don't want her to ever feel she has to apologize for her father.

—I don't know what he said, Sam . . . whether he was angry or polite . . . or what. He's not coming back.

Her old voice grew ragged with hate.

—He's not fit to wipe the shoes of Lafayette! She turned to me, face livid, lips twisted.

—There's your answer, Sam. That's what drove your fine Mississippi friend off. Monique's a nigger! You wouldn't want your friend to marry a nigger, would you, Sam!

I must have cringed. I felt as if I had been struck by a whip. My face was tight. I stood up.

—Shut up! You can't . . .

But then I saw her eyes. I knelt by the chair and put my head against her arm.

She said, —Oh, Sam . . . oh, Sam, what can I do? How can I help her? What can I do?

I understood.

With me it wouldn't have made any difference. But I didn't come from Mississippi. I didn't get letters on crested stationery. I didn't have a Southern mother and two Southern sisters who lived in a mansion with tall white columns. I didn't own a mill. I didn't have social position. I wasn't rich. And I wasn't proud of my family tree.

I knew it must have been a shock. It was a shock to me.

He hadn't left the room. He was standing with one foot on a chair, shining his boots.

I smiled. —Hi, Britt.

—Hi. His voice was low, glum.

I took a deep breath.

—I know about it, Britt. Mrs. Blair told me.

—Oh? He took his foot off the chair and straightened up, waiting.

—Well?

—It's tough, I said. —It's a real mean one.

—How right you are, he said.

I took my cap off and threw it on the bed.

—Look, Britt, look at it this way. Actually what difference does it make? Why not just forget about it?

—I am, he said.

—No, look, I mean . . . I mean why does it have to make any difference at all? Who'll know about it? You don't have to tell anybody and just tell Monique not to say anything.

He looked at me in disbelief.

—Are you crazy?

—Your people don't have to know, Britt. You don't even have to go home if you don't want to. You're rich, Britt. You can live in Europe. Nobody need ever know.

—I'd know, he said.

I wasn't pleading with him. I was pleading for Monique.

—If you love the girl, what's the difference? You love her, don't you?

—Oh, can it! he said. He threw the shoebrush into the corner and turned.

I wanted to shake him. Instead I took his arm and turned him around.

—Look, Britt, you owe that girl something. She's not a floosie, some little tramp you picked up in the Negresco Bar.

He looked amused.

—My God, you sound like some character off a show boat.

—Look, just sit down and think about it this way. Yesterday you were going to marry the girl. Now that's basic, isn't it? Now you've found out something that . . . that you don't like. But that doesn't change the girl, does it? She's the same girl, isn't she?

—She had plenty of chances to tell me, he said.

—Well, she didn't. Maybe she was afraid. Maybe she loved you too much. She finally did tell you, didn't she?

—Yeah, thank God for that, he said.

—You can't just go walking off and leave her.

—Who says I can't?

—Why, you were engaged to her, man!

He looked amused again.

—I've been engaged to lots of girls.

Anger tightened my chest.

—Are you trying to tell me you never meant to marry her?

—Maybe, he said. He had that little supercilious smile I had

seen so many times. —Maybe so, maybe not . . . who knows? The course of true love, you know.

—Britt, get this straight. I'm not going to let you treat that girl this way. You were the first man she . . . she ever went with. You've got to sit down and think about it and you've got to go back and talk with her. You owe her that much.

—I don't owe her anything, he said.

—Yes, you do.

—Look, Sam, he said, you're wasting your time. I know you like the gal. So did I. But I never have been panting to carry her to the altar. I blew a little sugar in her ear and honeyed her up. But even if all things had been equal I doubt if we'd ever gotten around to getting married. And now that I've learned she had a nigras pappy, I'm damned sure we ain't.

I was cold with anger.

—You never said this before.

—Why should I have?

I must have hidden my anger well. He grinned and slapped me on the arm.

—Aw, come on and forget it. That's what I'm going to do. He winked.

—It wasn't a bad piece of tail after all.

I hit him then. It was too high. It hit him on the cheek but it sent him flying backwards to the floor. I sprang at him, intending to stamp the life out of him. But he was smart. He was always smart. He lay flat on the floor, not moving. He didn't even raise his hands to protect himself. He didn't shift his eyes. I kicked him. He didn't grunt.

—Get up! Get up! I screamed.

He lay perfectly motionless, staring straight at me.

I called him every filthy name I had ever heard. I cursed his family and his mother and his sisters. If he had moved once I meant to kill him.

But he lay motionless.

Finally my anger gave way to a deep loathing. I stood there sick and disgusted with him and myself.

He sat up. His voice was level.

—I could have you court-martialed for this.

Our eyes met for a long time. I spat at him and walked from the room.

I got drunk that night
On mouth-puckering green cognac
At twenty-five dollars
A bottle.
When, finally, I couldn't hold myself up
At the bar,
I bought another bottle
To take with me,
And staggered out to do something
I'd never done before:
Find a woman.

I didn't want one of the chichi tarts
Who hung around the night clubs.
I wanted an honest whore,
A pro,
Like myself—
A woman with soft arms
And big breasts
Where I could lay my head
And cry.

I found her waiting
On the first corner.
She was blond and softly plump
With big mascaraed eyes
And a good-natured, stupid smile,
A lot like the wives of the railroaders
Who used to laugh at my old friend,
Caboose Jones.
Yo-Yo,
That was what they called her.
She took me home to her dingy room.
I gave her all the money in my pockets.
But I didn't touch her.
I was very drunk.
And I got drunker.
I sat on the edge of her bed,
And swigged cognac, and told her . . .
But I don't remember what I told her.
I wanted to talk about women,
And I sat there,

Warm cognac running down my chin
And staining my shirt,
Over and over again, asking,
—Why do women always love no-good bastards?
—What do women want, anyway?
—Love?
—Ha! Don't make me sprain my aching back
Laughing.
—Devotion?
—Ha! That one's for the birds, Yo-Yo,
That one's for the birds.
—What do they want?
—Snow jobs?
—Sweet talk?
—Lotsa money?
She tried to take my bottle.
—Babee, you will get seeck.
—No, dammit,
Leave me alone.
Tell me what they want,
Tell me what women want.
I still remember the twist
To her whore's mouth,
Pity
In her painted eyes.
—Zey want to love somebody, babee . . .
—Zat's all.
—Zey want to love.

ELEVEN

We didn't speak to each other all that week except when it was absolutely necessary. Jerry had intensified his mortar barrages. I was almost glad of it. It gave me something else to

worry about, periodic relief from the thinking . . . the slow misery.

I sat huddled against a wall most of the time, brooding, staring into space. I couldn't organize my feelings. Half the time I was furious with her for falling in love, for giving herself to him. Half the time, I felt like weeping because of her unhappiness.

There was only one thing I knew positively. I loved her; I loved her dearly. I had to have her, marry her as soon as I could. But I was young and I had my pride. I hated him. And sometimes I almost hated her, because I had to take her, knowing that he had thrown her aside.

But I knew that I would take her on any terms. I didn't even think about her father. That didn't make any difference at all. It was Britt . . . Britt, the smooth operator. He had walked in and taken her away from me, and now I had to take her back, knowing his mark was on her.

I would be firm, a little cold. I would make her pay for what she had done, but, then, after she was properly contrite, I would take her back—and I would love her forever.

I didn't quite know how I would behave, but I would decide after I saw her. I scarcely noticed the mortars after that. I forgot about the war. I couldn't wait until the week end. I was up at dawn on Saturday, dressed and shaved. I was the first man aboard the six-by-six. Britt was not aboard. I should never have taken him in the first place. Part of the fault was mine.

It was late afternoon when I got to the officers' villa. I didn't bother to change clothes. I washed my face and hands and combed my hair and put on a tie.

I wasn't sure she would be there, but I was hoping she would, hoping desperately. It was almost dark when I reached the house. I stopped on the lawn and pretended to be looking at the flowers until I could catch my breath. I had almost run up the hill.

I had to knock twice, loudly, before Anna opened the door. She had on a black dress and I almost didn't recognize her without her little white maid's cap. Her eyes were red and swollen.

—Oh, sir, it's you, she said. She began to cry.

My first thought was that something had happened to Mrs. Blair.

—Mrs. Blair, I said, is . . . ?

—She left this morning, sir, Anna said. —She left early this morning.

—But . . . what . . . where?

—Oh, sir, you don't know? You don't know?

She was a stupid woman. She struck me with it without warning. She blurted it out of her silly mouth between sobs.

—Miss Monique is dead. Our little Miss Monique is dead!

I still remember the softness of her fat arm, how my fingers bit deep and how she winced. I gritted, —What are you talking about?

She was racked with big, choking sobs.

—Miss Monique has killed herself! A sleeping draught, sir. They found her yesterday. Dead, sir. In Vevey. Alone in Vevey. *Ah, la pauvre petite!*

From far away I heard my voice asking slowly, stupidly, —Where is Vevey?

—In Switzerland, sir.

—Yeah . . . I said. —Yeah . . .

—*In Switzerland.*

—*Vevey is in Switzerland.*

—*Switzerland.*

—*Yeah . . .*

I don't know how long I stood there. I remember walking down the front steps because I could hardly breathe and there was a trembling in my right leg which I couldn't control. I remember seeing the grass. I had to fight to keep from throwing myself on it, face down.

The rest is a blur until I found myself lying on the bed at the officers' villa, staring up at the ceiling. There was a party there that night. I could hear the music and the laughter. I lay in the darkness and couldn't move.

I remember thinking, —*You can't stand this. You've got to talk to somebody. You'll die if you don't. You've got to find a chaplain or a priest, or somebody. You'll die if you don't.*

I don't know how much the human mind can bear before, mercifully, it breaks under the burden. But there, in the dark-

ness that night, I think I had almost reached that point when . . . I remembered him.

I could taste, actually taste, my anger. It was cold and bitter like tarnished brass. And it helped. Because I lay there and schemed and planned how I would kill him.

Many times since I've thought how lucky I was to have two nights and a day to pull myself together before I saw him.

He was coming out of the dugout, red-eyed and unshaven. I told him as brutally as I could.

—Monique is dead. She killed herself with sleeping medicine.

He stood bolt upright, and the blood slowly drained from his face.

—When? he finally whispered.

—Four days ago in Switzerland.

I had to hold myself tightly to keep from springing on him. The effort made me tremble. My voice was shaking, gritty.

—I'm going to kill you, Britt. I don't know how or when, but I'm going to kill you!

I couldn't help baring my teeth with pleasure when I saw the fear in his eyes.

He was afraid of me.

Oh, he was very afraid

Of me.

I could see

Sheer terror

In his watchful eyes

When I reached out to pick up

My carbine,

Or unsheathed

My trench knife;

The way he stiffened when I walked

Behind him.

Even when mortars

Came rattling in,

And we cowered on the dugout floor

Close together,

He carefully avoided touching me.

He knew I was primed
With hate,
And the slightest jostle
Would touch me off.

TWELVE

It was less than a week later when the colonel sent his jeep up for me. It was beginning to get cold. I sat huddled in a blanket as we jounced down the winding mountain road to Luceram, the tiny village where the colonel had his CP. For the first time, I noticed that the icecaps on the peaks were creeping down toward the tree line.

There was another officer with the colonel, handsome, brisk, a shaving-cream-ad type.

—This is Major Blaine, Sam, the colonel said. —He's from Staff G-2.

Major Blaine shook my hand and flashed his white, perfect teeth at me. He smiled a bit too much. —Staff thinks your plan is brilliant, he said. —Brilliant.

I looked at him blankly. The colonel smiled slightly and motioned me to a chair.

—The plan for setting up an OP in the valley, Sam.

—Because of certain information we've received from Intelligence, the general himself is interested in your plan, said Major Blaine. —He thinks it's entirely feasible, but he wants to know if you think the situation has changed any. And he wants to know if you're still willing to have a go at it?

—Yes, sir, I said. —And as far as I know, the situation hasn't changed any—unless it's worse. I looked at the colonel.

He nodded. —Somewhat worse. I don't know whether they've brought up more mortars or whether they have been able to zero us in better. But I think the point Major Blaine wants to make, Sam, is that the general considers this a strictly

volunteer mission. And he wants to know if you'll undertake it on that basis.

—Yes, sir, I said.

The colonel looked at me thoughtfully.

—Who would you take with you, Sam?

I may have hesitated for a moment.

—Sergeant Harris, sir.

—What about Harris' request for a transfer to Fire Direction Center—does that make any difference? the colonel asked.

I think I hid my surprise well.

—Oh, no, sir. He just . . . just thinks he can get another stripe there. I tried a smile. —He still wants to go.

I waited, tense. The colonel nodded. —All right, Sam.

Major Blaine looked at his wrist watch. —The general wants to brief you on this personally. Suppose I set up an appointment at 2100?

The colonel said, —I'll get Harris down here, Sam.

I stood up quickly.

—No, sir, I'll . . . I have to go back anyway. I'll tell him.

He was in the OP, scanning the valley with his glasses.

—We're going down in the valley, I said. —Just you and me.

He looked at me searchingly.

—I don't want to go.

—I've volunteered for you, I said.

—But I don't . . .

I snapped. —Go take a shave, Sergeant, and put on a tie. We're going to see the general at 2100.

I held out my hand for the glasses. He handed them to me and left the OP without a word.

The general's office was in one of the administration buildings in Nice. It was large and oval and lined with maps covered with plastic overlays. Britt and I sat silently and let the colonel and Major Blaine do the talking while we waited.

When the general came in we stood stiffly to attention but he said cheerfully, —Rest, gentlemen, rest. He was a medium-sized, dapper man, handsome, with a small, carefully trimmed mustache. His eyes were bright, steady. He smiled and shook hands with all of us.

He waved us to chairs and sat behind his desk.

—Let's have some smokes, Al, he said.

—Yes, sir. Major Blaine passed around a flat tin of Virginia cigarettes.

The general sat back smiling, but studied Britt and me carefully.

—So these are the young men who want to go to Sospel, are they? He waited until we had lighted our cigarettes, then leaned forward briskly, all business.

—The plan's a good one. I think it will work. We have an especial reason for wanting it to work now. During the past few days we've had intelligence—from the Maquis and others—that the enemy is grouping, preparing for something. It can only be one of two things. A: They are planning to attack. B: They are going to withdraw. We don't want them to do either. We'd rather keep them where they are, immobilized.

—But they are going to move, so that gives us two problems. One: To find out in which direction they are going to move. Two: To kill as many of them as we can when they start.

He turned to Major Blaine. —Al, put up that new overlay.

—Yes, sir. Major Blaine fastened a plastic overlay with the newest positions marked in red and blue over a map behind the general's desk. We knew the map like the palms of our hands. So did the general. He stood up and, without hesitation, put his finger directly on our OP.

—Now, this is Sugar Four. Lieutenant Loggins' plan was to move the OP around to here—he swept his finger to the right—to this ridge: K26. There are three things wrong with this plan. One: We don't improve our position appreciably. We have a different view of the terrain but the same elevation. The main activity is still back here. He tapped the town with his finger. —Two: We think enemy observers are back of K26, on this ridge, K9. Three: We know enemy patrols sweep the ridges periodically. One of them is bound to snoop you out.

—We must establish an OP where, One: The enemy least expects it. Two: Where we can see what is going on in the town.

—I have decided to establish an OP here, on Checkpoint 30.

I thought he had made a mistake. I had fired that checkpoint in myself.

—But that's the town hall, sir, I said.

He didn't change expression. —That's correct, Lieutenant; town-hall tower, terrain elevation eighty-three feet. It has a view of the town and the valley. We know the tower isn't manned. It's too dangerous. They've expected us to knock it down.

He took his seat. —Now, the essence of this plan is boldness. The enemy doesn't expect us to come and sit on top of them. I don't think you'll find many patrols on the roads. They know we're not going to attack. Your big difficulty will be to avoid gun crews and casualties in the valley. There'll be sentries at the key points. You may have to kill some. Stay away from farm-houses. We don't know who the collaborators are. Once you reach the town, we don't anticipate any difficulty. They won't expect you there.

—You'll prepare yourselves as if for a combat jump. You'll take your radio, K and D rations for at least a week, escape kits and—no weapons.

—Side arms, sir? the colonel asked.

—No weapons, repeated the general. —There are three reasons. One: We're not going down there to kill Germans with small arms. Use artillery. We want to hit him hard. Two: Weapons would offer too great a temptation. They might cause you to take chances and we want you to hide. One shot from a side arm or a carbine and the mission is over. We've wasted our time. Three: Weapons wouldn't be any good except defensively, anyway. If they corner you somewhere and you start fighting them, they'll just kill you. If they do corner you, smash your radio, put your hands up and surrender.

—You'll have to play fox and hounds. Without weapons, you'll be forced to play fox and hounds. You can carry your knives. If you meet sentries, you know what to do.

—You won't carry cigarettes.

—When you reach Checkpoint 30, you'll establish an OP and check in. You won't follow radio procedure. Fire Direction Centers will be alerted, and two men will be on duty at all times to do nothing except listen for your signals. When you reach the tower you will switch your radio on and say "Established." When you give fire missions, you will simply call the checkpoint, "Checkpoint 28" or "Checkpoint four-zero."

If the mission isn't fired after a proper interval, repeat the call. Don't switch your radio on unless it is absolutely necessary. They'll get a cross-bearing on you, if you do. If the enemy starts withdrawing the signal will be "Italy," repeated at one-minute intervals for ten minutes. If they start advancing, the signal will be "Nice," repeated for the same length of time. Kill them at every checkpoint, if you can. We'll give you the heaviest support possible on every signal you send.

He turned toward the map. —I think enough checkpoints have been established to cover all positions. Study the map again and if you don't think so, fire in others tomorrow.

He looked at a pad on his desk. —Lighting-up time tomorrow is 1900. He stood up at the map again. —At 1900 you will leave your OP and proceed down this ridge, K6B. It's rocky and it's steep, but it's been used before. It's covered with loose shale, so study it closely with your glasses tomorrow and try to pick some landmarks to guide you down. When you reach the floor of the valley all roads will lead to Sospel. Whether you walk the roads or follow alongside them is left to your discretion. You may discover that walking the roads openly offers your best protection. You'll have to decide.

—You won't be able to reach Sospel before daylight unless you're lucky. Take cover somewhere. Don't—and let me emphasize this strongly—don't approach civilians. A lot of them are collaborators. Don't let your radio fall into enemy hands.

He looked at us intently for a moment, then stood up. He smiled.

—That's all, gentlemen. I have an engagement. If you have any questions, Major Blaine will answer them.

He shook hands with us briskly. To Britt and me he said, —Good luck.

He was more relaxed the next day. Maybe it was because he knew I wouldn't be carrying a gun in the valley. Maybe it was because I was too busy to sit watching him, hating him. I gave him the job of finding a route to follow down into the valley. He was better at terrain than I was and I didn't want him at my back. It was going to be a difficult descent, particularly since we would be off balance with the radio backpacks. I think I dreaded it more than anything else.

It was not a ridge, despite what the map showed. It was a steep bluff, gullied by erosion and absolutely bare of vegetation. Loose shale, the size of flagstones, rested precariously on the ridges, and sticking up in the gullies, like rows of jagged teeth, were boulders ranging from the size of a pack howitzer to the size of a small house. I measured it on the scale in my field glasses. It fell away at an angle of seventy degrees. It was eighteen hundred feet from its jagged edge to small pines growing on the rocky ground at its bottom. Britt spent most of the day studying it through his glasses, marking, erasing and remarking a route on a contour map.

During the day, with ropes and no heavy equipment, a squad of men probably could have worked their way down it in a couple of hours. At night, with no ropes, and with our heavy backpacks, it would take us three times that long . . . if we were lucky. If we were unlucky, our mission would end on the jagged rocks before it even started.

I fired in a few more checkpoints, mostly houses and other buildings around the periphery of the town, using white phosphorus and purposely falling short. Then I calculated the distance from my burst to the building and radioed that to Fire Direction Center as my checkpoint.

Every chance I had, I studied Checkpoint 30—town hall. It was a stone building, old and somewhat dilapidated. The roof was gray slate. There was a clock in the tower but it had not been working for weeks. There was a small square directly in front of the building. It looked as deserted and unused as the rest of the town. The square was also part of Checkpoint 30. It was one of the first checkpoints I had fired in. It had looked as if it might be used by Jerry if he ever lost his caution, so I had fired it in well. One battery had raked the small square and obscured it in dust and smoke. The other battery had raked the building. I could see a jagged hole at one corner where a shell had ripped off the cornice. But Checkpoint 30 was an objective, not a target. I studied it closely, trying to commit it to memory.

—I've got it, Britt said.

I turned to him. He had finished drawing a route.

—It's going to be rough in spots, he said, but if we take it easy, I think we can get down over at the right edge.

He offered me the map. I shook my head.

—It's your job, I said, hating him so much I didn't want to look at him.

He hesitated. —We . . . we should have a ten-foot length of rope to tie ourselves together in case . . .

I couldn't help it.

—In case I decide to push you, Sergeant, just a little push?

He paled and his eyes became watchful.

I stood looking at him until, suddenly, I could feel my breath coming faster. I realized that, without willing it, I had bared my teeth in a flat grin. I turned away abruptly.

—All right, get a rope.

When I killed him, it wasn't going to be from behind. I wanted to look in his face first.

At 1800 a lieutenant and three men from A company came to take over the OP. I briefed them on the terrain, then walked back to the dugout with Britt following.

The colonel and Major Blaine were already there. Major Blaine looked out of place on a mountaintop.

—Ha! I've brought you some presents, he said. He opened a musette bag and handed each of us an oilskin escape kit. You'll find everything there, he said, maps, saws, three hundred dollars in francs—and morphine.

We put the escape kits in the leg pockets on our jump pants.

Major Blaine held up two lengths of piano wire, taped at the ends.

—Garrotes, he said darkly. —You can use 'em, eh?

We coiled the wires and put them in our hip pockets.

—These are from the general personally, he said proudly. He produced two small pen flashlights. We were grateful for them.

He even produced a small tube of black grease paint for each of us.

The shadows were beginning to lengthen. We gave our equipment a final check. Musette bag with K rations and toilet tissue; chocolate D rations for our jump pockets; shelter halves; jump knives, in their little jacket pockets; trench knives, strapped securely to boots; halazone tablets; canteens, filled; first aid kits; and firing maps.

We smeared the grease paint on our faces, hands and across

the backs of our necks. It smelled like cold cream, sweet like a woman.

Like a woman! I felt that tightness, almost a pain in my chest.

The other men in the squad gathered around, helping us on with our equipment. I had asked the colonel to give them a week's leave in Nice. Now I asked Major Blaine to give them a ride down. He said he would.

He held up his hand importantly.

—Synchronize watches!

The colonel and I exchanged glances, but dutifully Britt and I pulled the stems on our wrist watches while the major counted, —Ah-one, Ah-two, Ah-three, Ah-four, Ah-five—1900.

The men and then the colonel shook our hands.

—Good luck, Sam. Good luck, Britt, said the colonel.

Major Blaine shook our hands firmly and showed his teeth.

—Good killing, men, he said.

Major Blaine had seen too many movies.

It was almost dark. It was chilly and somewhat cloudy, but I could tell there would be a moon later. We walked through the dark woods at a brisk pace. I was in the lead. It took us fifteen minutes to reach the rim of the bluff. Britt produced a rope. I tied the end around my waist firmly. He did the same. I motioned to him to go ahead.

He started, but paused.

—Listen, Sam, let's make an agreement.

—I don't want any agreements with you, Britt, I said.

—My God, man, he burst out. —It's not my fault. If it hadn't been me . . . don't you realize it would have been somebody else?

—Get moving, Britt, I said.

THIRTEEN

The first half-hour wasn't so bad. There was a moraine slide extending from the rim for a considerable distance. We went down sideways, jamming our feet boot-deep into the loose stone. But we had to move cautiously. A few times we started slides. We had to throw ourselves sideways and hold on tightly. Rocks struck our shoulders and rattled off our helmets. The loose, eye-stinging soil tugged, almost desperately it seemed, in an effort to take us down the mountain with it.

We were already hot and breathing hard when the moraine slide ended. We stood on the saw-toothed edge of a sheer cliff. The rising moon was weak, obscured more than half the time by fast-moving dark clouds. I could see tops of trees hundreds of feet below. A parachutist loses most of his fear of heights. To some extent he loses his ability to judge heights. I have seen men who have come crashing down on housetops, take off their harness, walk to the edge of the building and, blithely, jump to the ground. Some hurt themselves seriously. But a thirty-five-foot roof does not seem high when you have already drifted down eight hundred feet; just as forty miles an hour seems a creeping pace in an automobile when you have slowed down from seventy.

But height is height, and a basic fear. You come to terms with it, but you never conquer it entirely.

Britt stood at the edge for a long time, trying to get his bearings. Then he made a sharp left turn and we felt our way along the cliff cautiously, making wide detours around eroded indentations. After fifteen minutes we came to a rock face. Against the dark sky, I could make out the top sixty feet above me. The wall was traversed by irregular rock strata, making natural paths where the soil had washed out in between.

Without hesitation, Britt clambered up on top of the second stratum above our heads. I followed him. In places it was as wide as a sidewalk. In other places it narrowed to less than a foot. We hugged the wall as we walked along. The path was almost level for fifty feet or so, then it sloped downward, always winding slightly to the left. The moon was somewhat brighter now. I kept my eyes on the path, deliberately numbing my mind to glimpses I caught of the several hundred feet of empty space a few inches from my boots. The narrow places increased as we went along. Because of our backpacks and musette bags, we had to turn facing the wall, pushing against it because of the weight pulling us backwards, twisting our heads to look over our right shoulders, groping for fingerholds on the rocky wall. After a while the path veered even more sharply to the left and began to wind upwards. It moved upwards for such a long distance that I began to wonder if Britt was off his course. While we inched our way across a narrow stretch, faces and bodies pressed against the wall, hands extended for fingerholds, I hissed at him:

—Do you know where you're going?

He stopped and held on a moment or two, panting.

—We'll start down in a few more yards.

He was right. After five minutes the path began to descend steeply, too steeply. It grew increasingly narrow. And there was a worse hazard. We were working our way around to the foremost part of the wall. I had seen it through my glasses many times. It jutted out, ragged and slightly sloping, facing the valley. Rock slides and rushing water had broken or washed away the rock stratum, left it rotten and crumbling. As we pressed our bellies against the wall, sliding along by inches, rotten stone gave way under our fingers. For a breathless moment, we were thrown off balance, our packs pulling us backwards, until our scrabbling, digging fingers found a purchase. Every few yards there was an open, yawning gap in the path. Britt stopped and tested each of them painstakingly. Hugging the wall tightly, he extended his right foot and stamped the edge. Sometimes it crumbled and we hung there for long, long seconds until we heard the stones hit the ground below.

We jumped the small chasms sideways. Each time it was an

effort. Pressing our bodies against the wall until the rough surface dug into our chests and bellies, we kicked off on our left legs and hung, for an eternity, it seemed, until our feet reached the other side and our bruised finger tips groped frantically for something solid.

We inched along this way for almost an hour. Every dozen yards or so we stopped to rest, hanging on tightly and panting. Sometimes we looked steadily at each other without speaking.

We were on the point of the cliff now, directly opposite the town. The pale moon reflected off the slate roofs. There was another gap in the trail. Britt extended his foot and kicked the edge. It crumbled away. We waited and waited until we heard the stones hit. The sound was faint, far away. He kicked again. The edge held. He crept closer and kicked off. I heard his boots land solidly.

I edged up closer. The break was probably a yard wide. I shuffled along sideways almost to the edge. I paused and caught my breath. Now! I kicked off, pushing my body close to the rough face, groping with my right foot. It hit the ground solidly . . . and, then . . . the ground gave way. I slapped my hands wildly against the face, felt its rough surface slide under them. I was falling. I felt the rough, broken edge of the path strike my knee.

Then some instinct, some knowledge I didn't know I had, saved me. I dropped forward, face down. My heavy pack pinned me down, crashingly. The hard ground slapped me a bruising blow in the face. The edge of my helmet clanked against a rock. My chin strap snapped my teeth together. I lay there, not moving. I tasted the salt of blood on my lips. My feet extended over the edge.

I heard Britt's whisper. —Are you all right?

I didn't answer him. I lay there until I caught my breath, until the cold nausea left my belly. I turned on my side slowly and, pressing tightly against the wall, pulled my feet under me and pushed myself up. I felt the ground give again. I scrabbled sideways until it was solid under my feet. I looked back. Another piece of the edge, two feet long, had just broken away. I waited until I heard it fall. My legs were trembling. There

was a dull ache where I had hit my knee. The gap was now at least six feet across.

Britt was five feet away, glued to the wall. For the first time I became aware of the rope tied between us. I was glad it was there. If I had fallen, he would have gone with me.

He didn't move as I edged up to him. He was looking over his right shoulder. I peered around him. The trail had come to a dead end. I strained my eyes looking in the darkness, but I couldn't even see where it resumed. Britt motioned with his head.

—We'll have to go back.

—We can't, I said.

We stood there, trapped, listening to each other breathe. I was only dimly aware that, after a while, he stooped cautiously and returned his trench knife to its sheath on his boot.

I don't know how long we stood there. It could have been only a few minutes. It could have been a half-hour. I know it took a long time before I could even think coherently about our predicament.

—*What does a soldier do when he gets trapped?* I asked myself. I couldn't think of an answer to that one. —*He stays trapped, like a rat.*

—*Well, what does a rat do?*

My shoulder straps were cutting my shoulders. My legs were tired. My knee was a dull ache.

—*What does a trapped rat do?*

—*He sniffs out everything,* I thought. —*He sniffs out everything, no matter how hopeless it looks.*

I looked upward. The wall was sheer, not offering a foothold anywhere. It was definitely out. I looked to the right again. Useless. Holding the wall and carefully testing each inch with my weight first, I shuffled to the left and looked at the gap there. It was no use.

I eased sideways and shuffled along, looking down. Nothing but a deep, dark empty space—except for one place. About eight feet below, midway on the ledge where we stood, something jutted out from the wall. It was either a large eroded boulder or close-packed dirt, rounded on top and rising perpendicularly like a gigantic stalagmite. Between it and

the wall was enough space to accommodate a man . . . two men maybe. But it was too dark to see if anything lay under it.

I searched out every inch of it. If it was a boulder, it might hold if I jumped on it. If it was only dirt . . . I shook my head and studied it some more. I finally made up my mind. I hissed to Britt and he edged over to me. I pointed to the outcropping and began to slip off my backpack and musette bag.

—I'm going down there.

He studied the outcropping.

—What good will that do? Wait until morning.

—Yeah, I said. —Yeah, so Jerry can pick us off.

I laid my equipment on the ledge and, facing the wall, carefully lined up my body with the narrow space between the outcropping and the cliff. I took a deep breath and, holding it, pushed myself off with my toes. I felt the edge of the ledge brush past my face. I kept my legs only half-tensed. I closed my mind.

I hit with a solid jar. Something hard was against my back. I stood half-crouched, scarcely daring to breathe. I put my hand back of me. It was stone—solid stone. I straightened up and looked upwards. It was then I realized something lay at my feet. It was the rope that had been between Britt and me. I drew it up slowly, coiling it neatly. When I saw the hacked end I smiled grimly. I remembered then he had also had his trench knife in his hand after I took my fall.

I looked around me. On both sides the wall was flat. But below me, less than six feet away, was a narrow ledge. Below I could dimly make out what appeared to be another.

I called up softly.

—Drop my equipment and come on down.

A few moments later I saw his head silhouetted against the sky. He dropped my equipment so carefully I was able to catch it. Then he came plunging down, legs stiff. I even gave him a hand to help him keep his balance. I didn't mention the cut rope, although I almost felt his eyes watching me carefully as I unwound it and tied a loop in the end and slipped it around the boulder.

—You can follow me, now, I said. —I know the way as well as you do.

We used the rope almost constantly after that, putting the

loop around an outcropping on one ledge and then clambering down to another. The end frayed twice and we had to cut it off. It blistered our hands and wrenched our arms, but sweating and bruised, finger tips bleeding and trembling with exhaustion, we finally stood on a small moraine-strewn rise at the foot of the cliff. Fifty yards away was a dark woods. I looked at my watch.

It was exactly midnight.

We rested in the woods for nearly an hour. We didn't talk. We sat with our backs to trees and munched D-ration bars and took sips from our canteens. It was cold, surprisingly, bitter cold. My jump suit was wet with sweat from the climb and soon I was shivering. My feet were almost numb. I know he felt the same way. I heard him moving his arms briskly from time to time, blowing on his fingers. Still I sat there, waiting for my strength to return.

We had just started now. The cliff had been like a jump. No matter how dangerous a jump is, how close you brush with death, the act is meaningless in itself. It is only a form of transportation. The real job starts when you come crashing into the ground and stand up to fight.

Finally I stood up.

—These woods are Checkpoint 12, aren't they?

He got to his feet.

—Yes, we're at the northern edge.

—Then we'll move out until we hit the road, I said. —There are no houses along this stretch. We'll see if the colonel was right.

We moved through the woods, going slowly, feeling our way. You never know where a man or a squad of men may decide to bivouac. We paused from time to time, waiting, listening. Far off I heard a dog barking and once something that sounded like a man shouting. A large bird startled us when it flew from the top of a tree—an owl, probably.

The moon was brighter, riding high in a clearer sky.

After a quarter-hour, I saw the road through the trees, reflecting the moonlight. I stopped and studied each shadow, identified each clump of dark underbrush and every small tree. Roads can be dangerous.

I motioned him down and we crawled to the edge of the road on our bellies. I looked up and down it. I was surprised to find it so broad. From the heights above it had looked narrower, somehow not as well paved. While we lay there, I heard the soft *thunnk, thunnk, thunnk* of mortars being fired somewhere to our left, probably a half-mile away. I looked toward the heights and saw two of the shells burst, twinkling quickly and brightly like stars. After a long time we heard the muffled explosions from all three rounds. Somehow they seemed insignificant and harmless from a distance.

I turned to Britt.

—Keep your eye to our rear.

I stood up on the edge of the road and he followed me. I had gone perhaps twenty feet, staring intently up the open road, when . . .

To this day, I get the same frightening feeling of surprise when I think of it.

A Jerry stepped from the shadows.

—*Halten!* he said.

He was a big man, tall and heavy. He had his rifle on ready, and its barrel was less than five feet away from my right shoulder. He was grinning foolishly, as if it were all some child's game. I think it was my shock and fright that caused me to do what I did. Without completing the step I had started, I went plowing into him sideways. I swung my left fist blindly across the front of my body. It hit him in the belly hard and low. He grunted, bent forward and his rifle dropped from his hands. I found myself with one arm around him and slightly to his rear. My only thought was to stop him from yelling. I clamped my right hand over his face and we went backwards together with him on top of me, kicking his legs wildly. He was soft, flabby. I felt a flood of relief when I realized I could handle him easily.

Britt leaped on top of us. His legs were folded up and his knees landed solidly in the man's belly. His arm flashed downward. He had struck the German in the chest twice before I realized he was using his trench knife. The Jerry made a small grunting sound, heaved once, then lay still. I felt a slow breath escape between my fingers.

My first impulse was one of anger. I started to say, —You didn't have to do that!

Instead, I didn't say anything. Perhaps it was better. My legs were twined around the Jerry's body. I sat up with his head almost in my lap. I kept my hand tightly over his mouth. Britt stood up slowly. His chest was heaving, his eyes shining whitely in his blackened face.

He stood watching a moment and without a word went to the edge of the road and began jabbing his knife into the dirt to clean the blade. I looked down at the man's face and, cautiously, lifted my hand from his mouth. He was dead. I wiped the saliva off my hand on his sleeve and got up.

I looked up and down the road. It was still deserted.

—We can't leave him here, I said. —Give me a hand.

We each took an arm and dragged him into the woods. He was heavy. We found a slight depression in a small clearing and put him in it. We raked leaves and pine needles over him with our feet. I kicked more pine needles over the bared spots, trying to hide our traces as well as I could.

Britt hadn't spoken.

—Let's go, I said. —We'll stay off the road.

We made our way through the woods slowly, freezing every time one of us rustled leaves. There were sentries all along the road, at hundred-yard intervals. We heard one cough. Another time we smelled cigarette smoke and we knew one was sneaking a smoke in his cupped palm. Now that we were in the valley we heard dozens of sounds that we had never heard from the OP. Dogs barked, men shouted occasionally, and very faintly, from time to time, I heard vehicles start up.

I knew we were about due to run out of cover. Already the woods had extended farther than I had expected. Once I debated whether or not we should stay hidden in them until the next night. Then I remembered the dead German and his poorly camouflaged grave. If they found his body, I knew they would beat every inch of the woods.

At 0230 I halted and waited until Britt came abreast of me.

—We've got to make better time, I whispered.

He grunted.

I took off at a quicker pace, almost dogtrotting across the

open spaces. In fifteen minutes we were at the edge of the woods. We lay down.

Before us was a broad, open field. I could barely make out the outlines of a large house. I got my map out and by angling it to catch the moonlight tried to get an exact bearing. The house was about a hundred yards away. I knew it well. It was a checkpoint. We could see it clearly, even without glasses, from the OP. We had never seen any life about it. It was deserted, I knew, too close to us for Jerry to risk using it. To my left, less than seventy yards away, the road made a sharp left turn toward Sospel. The bend in the road was also a checkpoint. A hedgerow which formed a boundary to land which went with the large house was about thirty yards to our left. I was debating whether or not to make for the hedgerow when, without warning, I had my second shock of the night. There was a rattle, a muffled command and a mortar coughed. It seemed to be almost on top of us. I buried my face in the dirt. Another rattle, another command, another mortar. Then another. I heard the rustle of Britt's clothes as he edged backward.

I raised my head slowly. I heard low voices close by. There was a Jerry mortar crew in the hedgerow. I could have thrown a stone on top of it. I peered in that direction and, suddenly, clearly, I knew why we had never been able to find the killing mortars. What we had taken for hedgerows, what had seemed to be hedgerows from our positions, were really gullies. They were very deep. What seemed to be small trees and underbrush from above, what seemed to be small trees from where I lay, were actually the tops of sizable trees. The mortars were hidden deep in the gullies. That was why we were never able to spot a muzzle flash.

I lay for a long time, debating whether to chance the road again or make for the deserted house. The house was an ideal hiding place. Not only was it under observation from our OP's, it was surrounded by open fields. Jerry wouldn't dare try to approach it. It was just a little more than a mile from the town. I heard a rooster crow. It was still a long time until daylight and maybe it was a rooster that had been aroused prematurely. But it caused me to make up my mind. I slipped backward to Britt.

—We'll go to the house, I whispered.

He nodded.

I crawled along the edge of the field for another fifty yards, taking my time, resting when my breathing came too hard. When we were at an angle to the rear of the house, I stood up and, bending low, sprinted toward it. I heard Britt pounding along behind me. There were low bushes in the field. At the edge of the yard, we dropped flat and caught our breaths. I looked the house over carefully. I knew every inch of it, but I wanted to be extra careful. It stood silently, windows smashed and roof almost destroyed from our fire. Jerry couldn't have used it, even if we had not had it under such close observation.

I crawled across the back yard to a cellar window. I looked it over carefully for hidden wires, then pushed it open and dropped in. The cellar was deep and dark and smelled of stagnant water and mildewed leather. I didn't dare use my light. I stood peering into the darkness until Britt came tumbling through the window. I tugged his jacket and sat down with my back to the wall.

FOURTEEN

I opened my eyes quickly, instantly wide-awake. It is a trait combat soldiers and animals share. I sensed something was wrong. Then I realized it was still dark—pitch-dark. I had fallen asleep instantly, heavily. I felt as if I had slept for a long time. But when I raised my arm and peered at the luminous dial of my watch I saw it was only 0620.

But why was it still dark?

I raised my head and looked toward the window we had entered. There was not a glimmer of light in the darkness. I stood up quickly and felt along the damp wall until I felt its edge. I shoved it gently and a stream of cold, gray light made me blink. I put my eye to the crack and looked out. The fields behind the house were empty, silent, covered with a

morning mist. Near my feet I felt Britt stir. I looked down at him. He had awakened and in his sweat-streaked blackened face his eyes were red-rimmed and watchful. I examined the window. The panes were fitted with heavy paper. From the ends which had been folded out, I saw it was similar to photographic wrapping paper, black on the inside and covered with a dull silver foil on the outside. I let the window gently drop back into place and stood there remembering how brightly the windows in the farmhouses in the valley had reflected the rays of the sun. Almost like mirrors, I used to think. They *were* mirrors.

I felt that cold, prickling feeling along my spine: the soldier's warning of danger.

—Come here, I whispered.

Britt came and stood by me. I felt for his hand and placed it against the window frame until the window was open an inch.

—Hold it there, I said.

By the dim light from the window, I could see most of the basement except the far corners. I took out my pen flashlight and began to explore it warily, flashlight in one hand, trench knife in the other.

Against one wall, rain had seeped in and lay in a green-scummed, stagnant pool. Against the opposite wall and covering all but a small space in the back wall, large crates were stacked almost to the ceiling. I flashed my light along them. They were made of some sort of composition board, covered with varnished cloth, and fitted with leather handles and straps. They were stenciled with numbers and words in German. Stacked atop the cases and packed in between them was other German equipment: uniform greatcoats, leather cartridge cases, a few shovel helmets, entrenching tools and some worn, mildewed harness. Three boxes in the lower tier were unstrapped. I raised the lid of one cautiously. Snuggled inside were massive, ugly mortar shells.

I flashed my light toward the small opening between the cases in the back wall. There was a stout wooden door there, well made, well painted. I played the small beam of light over the hinges. They were bright and well oiled. I went to the door, searched it carefully, then gently tugged the wooden

handle. It opened easily, with just a slight breath-stopping squeak from the hinge. I put my eye close to the crack. Beyond was a well-shored tunnel, already well lighted by gray daylight creeping in at the end twenty yards away.

I closed the door again gently and crept over to Britt.

—We've got to get out of here. This is a mortar dump. There's a tunnel leading to the ravine.

He had already seen.

—Yeah, I know, he said shortly. —Where do we go?

I looked around the cellar, flashed my light along the wall behind the stacked cases. There was the top of a door facing almost flush with the top case in a stack of four. It was the third stack from the end.

—We'll have to try to get upstairs, I said.

—Yeah, he said again, shortly. —And what good will that do?

I looked at him coldly.

—Had you rather stay here—trapped?

He shrugged.

I searched around and found a small stone and propped the window open a half-inch. I studied the stacked cases.

—We won't move them, I said. —We'll pull them forward just enough to squeeze behind them.

By the dim light, we began tugging and straining at the heavy cases. It was hard work. We pulled the top case forward a foot, then the second, and the third. Then we gritted our teeth and heaved at the obstinate bottom one. From time to time, when a floor board creaked or the house made one of those dozens of noises empty houses make, we stopped and stood sweaty-faced and chests heaving, ready to fight.

We worked frantically for more than half an hour to shift the cases forward. We put on our equipment and took the small stone from the window. Using my small light, I led the way into the narrow opening. It was much too small. I had to plant my feet firmly and push with all my strength to pull my backpack through. There was no knob on the door. I pried at the crack with my trench knife and searched its paint-peeled surface for five minutes before I was able to jam my little finger deeply enough into the empty knob socket to pull it open. With one last straining tug at my cumbersome backpack I

squeezed through. I helped pull Britt through and shut the door.

We stood at the bottom of a short flight of stairs, strewn with broken plaster and filth. A cold light came through the smashed windows and riddled roof. Examining every inch of the way for booby traps, we went upstairs.

The owner had left the house fully furnished. It was a mess. Our shells had done only a small part of the damage. As usual, Jerry had looted and smashed everything. Drawers had been pulled out, and clothing and household goods scattered. The rotting rugs were covered with filth and empty ration tins. Tables and chairs had been smashed. Pictures were slashed in their frames. Broken dishes still lay where they had been dropped, stack by stack. On top of the remains of a hacked, battered grand piano, there was a smashed violin. From a crystal chandelier, yanked from its moorings and hanging in shimmering fragments, there fluttered a pair of lace-edged, embroidered step-ins, lewdly marked with a heavy grease pencil.

We crawled on our bellies to a window and cautiously looked out toward the gully where Jerry had his mortar position. There was not a sign that he was there, not a sound. We wormed our way to another window at the front of the house and looked toward Sospel. There was a small orchard in front of the house, overgrown and untended. It was bounded by a deep ditch, filled with bushes and small trees. It was the beginning of the gully which, from above, we had mistaken for a hedgerow. It petered out at the edge of the orchard about thirty yards away. There was a narrow footpath there, following along the edge of a small wood which bordered wide fields filled with tangled, brown stalks of some grain, long uncut. At the edge of the field, probably a quarter-mile away, there was a row of houses, the outskirts of Sospel.

I scanned the houses with my glasses. There was not a sign of life, not a wisp of smoke, but I knew they were occupied. Heavy material hung at the windows and, peeking up over the edges of the small walled gardens at the back of each, I saw the tips of fruit trees. A poplar-lined street ran beside the garden walls.

I sat back and looked at Britt. His face was sullen, watchful. I realized again how much I hated his guts.

It was dangerous to stay where we were. If Jerry came for more ammunition, he might not notice the cases had been shifted. But, again, he might. In that event, it would only be a matter of time until he killed us. On the other hand, we couldn't cross the open fields in broad daylight. Not only would we be taking a chance with Jerry, but our own OP's might spot us and blast us. Our only chance was to get cover. I cursed myself for not taking a chance and hiding out in the woods.

Britt had been studying the landscape with his glasses. He took them from his eyes and sat back.

—Do you have any ideas? I asked.

He looked at me levelly, coldly. —No.

He was blaming me because things hadn't gone right. Let him blame me. Momentarily I felt almost happy that he was worried. But the mission was in danger, too. I shook off my thoughts of him and sat up and put my glasses to my eyes again.

The woods running behind the house and along the footpath didn't look right. They were too narrow, and besides it was just the sort of place Jerry would mine heavily or put men in. I followed them along until they broadened out into a considerable thick grove about a hundred yards behind the row of silent houses. I knew that landmark well. It looked as if it would be a good position to disperse vehicles or dig in gun positions. I had blasted it periodically, hit it hard—just in case. I knew there were no Jerries there.

If we could only get there.

I took out my map and located the woods. They were Checkpoint 8. They were a little less than a quarter-mile away. If we stayed close to the woods and ran like hell . . . even with our heavy packs, we could be there in a couple of minutes.

If there was only some way to keep Jerry busy for two minutes. I sat back and thought about it. Suddenly, like a flash, I thought of the answer. It was a chance, but as long as we remained where we were, every minute was a chance. I looked at the woods again.

—Come here, I said.

I pointed out the woods to Britt and then showed them to him on the map.

—We're going to make a run for those woods, I said.

His lips tightened. —Damned if I am.

—You'll do as I tell you, I snapped.

I pointed to the map.

—There are three checkpoints along the road opposite us. We'll smash all three. That ought to keep their heads down. As soon as the shelling starts we'll make a run for it. If other observers see us running they might take us for Jerries.

Britt thought about it. His face relaxed.

—It might work, he said.

—We'll keep our backpacks on, so we can run for it as soon as they start coming in, I said.

He nodded, and began uncoiling enough wire to bring his microphone to his mouth. I silently pointed the checkpoints out to him again. He nodded again.

We crawled through the room and crouched near the front door. It swung open on broken hinges. The radio batteries were on my backpack. I undid the short hose coupling and handed it to him. He connected it with his coupling and, putting his right hand around under his left arm, put his hand on the cut-on knob. He looked at me. I nodded. He snapped the switch and at the first crackle of the radio he pushed the mike button and said slowly,

—Checkpoint Nine.

—Checkpoint One-Zero.

—Checkpoint Five.

He snapped the radio off and stuffed the mike into his breast pocket.

We waited, crouched, tense, shoulder to shoulder. The seconds ticked off, slowly, ever so slowly. Suppose they wouldn't fire? Suppose they were waiting for the signal that we were established first? I tried to regulate my fast breathing. I would need it on the run.

We heard the swish of the first one overhead. Britt started to rise. I tugged him down by the arm. There was another—then another—and another.

—Now! I said.

We reached the front door, almost atop each other. At the same time the first one burst squarely on the curve of the road with a rumbling roar. The others echoed with mighty thumps,

farther up the road. We jumped off the front porch together, but when I took my first step, I was jerked up short, sent sprawling with Britt on top of me. My first horrified thought was that we had tripped over a booby-trap wire. We sat staring into each other's startled faces before simultaneously we realized that, stupidly, we had forgotten to unconnect the radio coupling between our backpacks. Britt undid it with one deft twist. We sprang to our feet and dashed for the edge of the woods.

They were coming in close, swishing and whining, and beating a thunderous tattoo all along the road. I only half-heard them. I kept my eyes ahead, fixed on the woods. I heard the thumping of Britt's feet behind me.

I cut left fifteen feet from the first sparse undergrowth and ran with all my strength for the trees in the distance. The ground was soft, slightly sandy. My backpack was rubbing my back raw it seemed. I seemed to be breathing fire. I was dimly aware that the shells were still pounding in. The colonel had kept his promise about giving us heavy support. The pines were coming nearer now, dancing crazily out of focus before my sweat-filled eyes. Fighting desperately for breath, I reached the first row of trees, saw them flash by from the corners of my eyes. I fell forward at full length on the pine needles. A few seconds later Britt fell beside me.

We turned and looked into each other's strained faces, breathing noisily.

There was a rattle of metal. We froze. Less than a dozen yards away a Jerry stood with his back to us washing his mess gear in a galvanized-iron tub, steaming over a fire. Directly in front of him was a field kitchen, with four or five other Jerries rattling pots and pans and talking loudly.

It seemed impossible they hadn't seen us.

—*Oh, God, I thought, how can everything go so wrong?*

There was no time for caution now. I sprang up again and dashed from the woods, not daring to look back. I heard Britt's hard breathing behind me as I dashed across a small rocky ditch, across a dusty road, to the wall behind one of the houses I had examined earlier through my glasses. I looked up and down the road frantically. At one end a small dust cloud crept along. Someone was coming.

I slid along with my back to the wall until I reached a small wrought-iron gate. I reached behind me and worked the catch, then tugged Britt's arm and stepped through backwards. I slid along the inside wall and stood there, the front of my helmet pressed tightly against the bricks, fighting for breath. Britt was gasping by my side.

—*Wer sind Sie?*

At first, I wasn't certain I heard the voice.

—*Wer sind Sie?* it repeated.

Britt and I turned at the same time, stiffly, slowly.

A tall, slender man in a threadbare tweed jacket stood ten feet away. He was distinguished-looking with pale skin and dark eyes and a small beard streaked with gray. He had a long-handled fork in his slim hands. I saw that he had been turning soil along a row of tomato plants. He was watching us coldly, warily.

—*Wer sind Sie?* he asked again.

I shot a glance at Britt. He bared his teeth in a broad smile and took a few steps toward the man.

The man took a step backward and raised the fork chest high.

—*Ich habe gesagt, wer sind Sie?*

I forced a smile and stepped forward with my hand out, the way you approach a strange dog. If I could just get close enough to grab him . . . I spoke soothingly. —We've lost our way.

He looked at us searchingly for a long time. He didn't change expression.

—Ah, so. I speak English, he said.

Britt took another step forward.

—We're lost. Maybe if you took a look at our map . . .

The man still hadn't changed expression.

—You are Americans, I think.

Britt and I exchanged glances.

—Yes, I said finally.

—Are you in force? he asked.

We didn't say anything.

He studied us a moment longer, then lowered the fork and thrust it upright into the ground.

—Come. It is better we talk inside, he said. He turned and started for the door, not looking back.

I motioned Britt to go ahead. He stooped quickly and pulled his trench knife from its sheath and thrust it into his pocket. I did the same.

We entered the kitchen. It was large and spotlessly clean. There were rows of shining pots and pans hanging around the walls and from a crossarm above a large stove.

The man shut the door and faced us. For a moment I thought he was going to embrace us. He would have if it had not been for our cold, watchful faces. There were tears in his eyes as he smiled at us.

—Gentlemen, I am Dr. Dunant. My home is yours. I will help you any way I can. I have prayed for this day.

We didn't say anything.

—Be seated, gentlemen . . . please sit down. Smiling, he almost skipped around the kitchen as he found us chairs.

He walked to the door and opened it slightly. I tensed and Britt half-rose. Dr. Dunant called, —*Jeanette, ma chérie, viens ici! Viens vite!*

We heard footsteps and a woman entered the room. She was tall, thin, almost gaunt, plainly dressed. She stepped back in fright when she saw us. Dr. Dunant took her hand and smiled.

—Jeanette, these gentlemen are Americans. Americans, my darling!

She stood stock-still, looking at us, searching our blackened faces. Then her own face melted and tears streamed down her cheeks. She came to us and took our hands and held them to her cheek.

—Oh, God . . . oh, dear God, you've come. You've finally come.

I knew we had found friends.

FIFTEEN

The Dunants had visited America. They told us all about it, gushed it out proudly as they dashed about joyously, getting wine glasses and washing them. They asked us a dozen times if we were comfortable, if there was anything we wanted, stopping now and then to smile at each other unbelievably and cling to each other tightly.

It made me feel a hero just to watch them.

Dr. Dunant produced a bottle of wine and, uncorking it tenderly, poured each of us a glass. He held the dust-covered bottle up proudly.

—I have been saving this for victory, he said.

—Victory hasn't come yet, Doctor, Britt said.

His pale face darkened for a moment, then he smiled.

—Ah, but you are the harbingers, my friends.

He held his glass up.

—To Victory . . . and peace.

We drank.

Madame Dunant couldn't seem to feast her eyes on us enough. She raised her glass.

—To our brave American friends who . . . She choked and couldn't go on. With arms around each other's waist and eyes brimming with tears, she and her husband drank to us.

Dr. Dunant was a native of the valley, the third generation of his family to practice medicine there. This was not his permanent home. Their own house was on the hill behind the town. German officers had taken it over. He proudly produced a picture of it, a two-storied stone house with tall eaves, surrounded by a carefully laid-out orchard. His eyes flashed.

—They have ruined my home. They have broken up the

furniture of my father and grandfather for firewood. They have destroyed my fruit trees. They are pigs! They have scattered their waste everywhere.

Madame Dunant put her hand soothingly on his.

I did not tell him our mission, but I produced my map and asked him if he could show me German installations. I gave him my pencil and in a few minutes he had it covered with check marks. From our own experiences I knew they were much thicker than we had supposed. Still I was astounded to discover they were concentrated so heavily.

—Yes, my friend, Dr. Dunant said, they are—he made a sweeping gesture with his slim hands—everywhere. It is your fault. You have not been ruthless enough. This valley is my home, but I would blow it to bits, claw up the very grass in the fields, to destroy them.

—Are they increasing their strength? Britt asked.

—There are more of them in the town now, said the doctor, but I do not know whether they have come through the pass or whether they have come down from the hills. These hills are well fortified, my friends. For hundreds of years, we French have kept men garrisoned here to guard the pass to Italy. There are extensive tunnels and bunkers running through them like . . . like you say—honeycomb.

—Have you noticed vehicles being concentrated? I asked.

—In the town mostly—yes, he said. —Here, I will show you. He took my map and marked it. —Here, and here—and along here, so. He looked at the map thoughtfully. —They have dug deeply, you must remember that, my friends. You must bombard them long and fiercely.

I had already located the house where we sat on the map. I had already picked a route to Checkpoint 30—town hall.

—Are there many people about on the streets at night? I asked.

—Not many, he said. —There is a darkness-to-daylight curfew unless one has a pass. There are some drunken soldiers, patrols and . . . He shrugged.

—How about collaborators? I asked.

—There are . . . some—too many. Bad women, greedy men. They are worse than the Boches. They order us about, blackmail us for our food, inform on us. We have had our bravest

shot because of them. We are powerless because of them. Someday we will have an accounting. Yes, my friends, our day will come.

Britt's voice was casual.

—I suppose the commandant has his headquarters in the town hall?

—No, he has headquarters in the town, near the church. Dunant reached for my map again and pointed to a building.

—It is here.

Britt asked his question another way.

—I thought the Germans always used town hall as headquarters when they occupied a town.

—It is too exposed, said Dr. Dunant. —You have bombarded it too often. It is empty. They only like to kill . . . not be killed, my friends.

He spoke slowly.

—They are clever . . . very clever. And they are cruel. It is difficult to imagine how cruel. A fortnight ago they seized three young men . . . young men whose families are close to us. They were brave young men who had been in communication with the Resistance. The *Allemands* ripped open their bellies with acetylene torches to make them inform . . . ripped open their bellies slowly. It is almost impossible to believe that such a thing should happen. But it did!

—We must never forget such things. We French must never let them rise again. Boches! Our town squares and parks are filled with monuments and plaques to our bravest and best who have been killed by them. They have slain our best for three out of four generations . . . 1870 . . . 1914 . . . and now, this! We will raise more monuments and plaques, but also we will have living monuments to remind us of their cruelty.

—In this town there is a mad woman named Jacqueline, a poor demented creature, who haunts the bistros and begs for wine. We give it to her, all we have. She is still young, but she looks an old woman. We try to care for her, but she is usually drunken and filthy. Yet, my friends, we revere her. There is not a man in this town who does not remove his hat when she passes, not a child who would not share his last small potato with her. She is one of our living monuments.

—Two years ago she was an ordinary barmaid in one of the bistros. But the Boches discovered she was acting as a courier for the Resistance. They seized her and slashed the nipples from her breasts to try to make her inform. But she did not talk, she went mad instead.

His eyes flashed. —Do you understand what I say, my friends? They seized a woman and slashed the nipples from her breasts! How can we ever forget this? How can we ever forgive this?

—*Non, non!* We must never let it happen again! When the statesmen say to us we must show magnanimity to the vanquished, we must harden our hearts and shout, *Non, non!* When people say to us, as they did before, Europe can never be strong and united until the Germans are strong, we must say, *Non, non!* We must never give them arms again. When they say to us, It is not the German people who are responsible for these outrages, it is their leaders . . . we must shout, *Non, non!* We cannot trust people who follow such leaders, who raise such masters!

—I say we must never let them get strong again. *Non, non!* To my dying breath, I shall shout it!

Madame Dunant put her hand on his.

—You must not upset yourself, she said gently.

He looked up at her for a moment, then took her hand and, almost roughly, pressed it to his lips.

They told us much that was useful: where patrols were heaviest, where ammunition and fuel dumps were located, where vehicles were serviced, the hours when supply trains came through the pass. Once while Dr. Dunant was again marking my map, I heard Madame Dunant say to Britt, —You have a family, yes?

—I have a mother and two sisters, he said.

—You do not have a wife?

—No, not yet, he said.

—Aha! she said, perhaps you have a sweetheart?

—Well, I . . . he began. I turned and looked at him. He dropped his eyes when he saw mine. He licked his lips.

—No, he said shortly.

I told the Dunants we would stay with them until dark. They protested.

—You must stay longer, said Dr. Dunant. A week . . . two weeks . . . we can hide you here. No one comes here. He paused. —Almost no one comes here. We will make you comfortable. We will find you food.

At noon, Madame Dunant started preparing lunch. She looked embarrassed.

—I am . . . am humiliated there is nothing except potatoes and tomatoes. Perhaps later we can . . . She looked at her husband.

We brought out our K rations and insisted that they share them. They were as delighted as children as they examined the small neatly wrapped packages and the tins of meat. We gave them each a D ration chocolate bar. Madame Dunant stood with shining eyes, holding it almost lovingly.

—It is the first chocolate I have seen in three years. I shall eat one small piece every day, only a very small piece, so it will last until you come again . . . with your friends.

There was much ado about whether or not we should wash our face and hands before lunch. Britt and I wanted to leave the streaked grease paint on. We knew we would need it later. It was finally Madame Dunant who made us change our minds.

—But I must see you! she protested. —I want to see your faces.

We washed with warm water at the kitchen sink and there was much laughter as she said, —You are beautiful. You are very beautiful.

We had a leisurely lunch and sat talking and drinking small cups of bitter ersatz coffee for a long time before Madame Dunant began clearing the table. Britt helped her. I spread the map out on the table and Dr. Dunant and I pored over it again.

None of us knew the door had opened until we heard the voice.

—*J'ai vu votre porte ouverte, alors je suis ici.*

A woman stood in the door leading to the rest of the house. She was blond and rather pretty in a flashy, overblown way. She was smiling too brightly, almost jeeringly.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to get to my feet. After my first mild start of surprise, I don't think I thought anything about it until I saw her face. Her smile faded. Her eyes darted about the room quickly, taking in our packs and helmets in a corner near the door. She stepped back slightly, as if debating whether or not to run.

I looked at Dr. Dunant. At first I thought it was anger that made his face so pale, so tight. Then I saw the terror in his dark eyes, sheer, stark terror. I looked at Madame Dunant. She stood transfixed, clutching a dish towel to her breast. Her eyes were wide with fright. No one moved.

The Dunants' fright did not escape the woman in the door. She looked at them closely, watchfully for a moment. Then her mouth widened in that same wide, somewhat jeering smile. She walked into the room self-assuredly, swinging her hips.

—*Ah! Vous avez invités*, she said.

I could see the effort it took for Dr. Dunant to pull himself together. He licked his lips nervously. It was a long time before he spoke.

—*Oui. Ils sont mes amis*.

The woman looked Britt and me over carefully, archly. She had blondined frizzly hair, almost orange, and her skin was pasty white. Her lips were thick and heavily painted. She had darkened a small mole on her cheek. There was a short, stiff hair growing from it. Her flashy dress was cut so low in front I could see the cleft of her heavy, white breasts. Her hips were wide and she swayed them slightly even when she was not walking. She looked like a tart.

Her jeering smile had not changed. She looked at Dr. Dunant and raised her plucked eyebrows.

—*Alors, présentez-moi*.

There were tiny beads of perspiration on Dr. Dunant's forehead. I looked at his stricken face and tried to remember enough of my poor French to recall what the woman had said. When she first entered, she had said something about finding the front door open and deciding just to walk in. Then she had said, —Ah, you have guests. And now she was asking to be introduced.

Dr. Dunant raised his hand stiffly and motioned to Britt and me.

—*Ils sont mes amis, Mademoiselle Ronsard*—they are my friends, he said. Her name was Ronsard. I knew she was an enemy.

Britt and I both murmured, —How do you do?

—Ah! Engleesh you speak, said the woman. She studied us and lowered her eyelashes provocatively, with a wise smile.

—Engleesh is vaary chic, is it not so? I speak Engleesh a leetle. In Nice I speak Engleesh wiz my franzs vaary mooch.

She sat down in Dr. Dunant's chair, leaned back negligently with her hand on her hip and crossed her legs. She watched closely while I folded the map. She smiled with half-lowered eyelids and swung one leg slowly. It was dead-white with coarse, dark hair growing thickly across the shin.

—You mus' speak ze Engleesh wiz me, so I can learn better, she said.

No one spoke. She looked at us smiling, enjoying herself. Finally Madame Dunant said, —*Vous-êtes venu chercher . . .*

—*Non, non*, Mademoiselle Ronsard cried. —You mus' speak ze Engleesh!

—You have come for the things, Madame Dunant said slowly. —I will . . . I will get them for you.

Mademoiselle Ronsard waved a quieting hand.

—*Non, non*, zere is much time. I will speak wiz your franzs. She smiled at us, looking us up and down through her half-lowered lashes.

—Madame Dunant is varry good franz wiz me. She give me mooch nice clothes and jewels. I zink she give me many chic zings now. Many jewels, I zink.

She turned to Madame Dunant and her eyes narrowed. —Is eet not so, my dear franz? Madame Dunant stood stiffly. Mademoiselle Ronsard laughed and turned back to Britt and me.

—A woman must keep herself beautiful, *non*? Do not men like ze beautiful women?

I sat down. She smiled at me knowingly.

—You and your franz have come long ways?

—Not far, I said.

—You weel stay long?

—I don't know, I said.

She leaned forward slightly. I could smell her cheap perfume.

—Ah, I thought mens know evar'zings.

I didn't answer and she sat back again and laughed.

She studied me a moment.

—You like Sospel, *non*?

—Yes, I said.

—It is a nice place, she said. —Eet is varry sad there is war. I do not like war.

Dr. Dunant spoke for the first time. —Perhaps Mademoiselle would like to see the things my wife has saved for her. Then we can have coffee and talk. Yes, we can talk. His face was tight.

Mademoiselle Ronsard narrowed her eyes and looked up at him. She studied him carefully. Finally she showed her teeth in that knowing smile.

—Yes, I weel get my zings. My beautiful zings.

She stood up. She looked at Dr. Dunant again.

—We will talk zen. We will talk long time. I will like to talk.

She looked at Britt and me closely. Her mouth twisted slightly. —You weel not go away. It would make me varry onhappee. Her look was filled with meaning.

—It would make your franz, Docteur and Madame, onhappee —varry onhappee, indeed.

She looked at us, as if to see if we understood, then smiled and, swinging her hips, went to the door without a backward glance.

Madame Dunant darted after her. She shot one last terror-stricken look over her shoulder.

Dr. Dunant closed the door and quickly put his ear to it. He turned and his face was white, drawn, damp with perspiration.

—That woman! That woman! he said. —She is the mistress of the German commandant. She is bad! Very bad! She visits everyone and threatens to have them beaten or shot if they do not give her clothing and jewels. She has taken almost everything my poor wife owns. She is a spy and she is cruel!

He put his slender hands to the sides of his pale face and said dully, —The door, the door was locked! I locked it myself!

He looked up quickly.

—She will tell the Germans you are here. She will go to them as soon as she leaves the house! We must not let her leave. His eyes were dark with fright. —We must not!

I looked at Britt. He was stony-faced.

—Maybe we can bribe her. We have money, I said.

—*Non, non*, said Dr. Dunant. —You do not understand. She is greedy. She is evil! She will take your money and laugh while they shoot you.

—We'll have to hold her until we get away, Britt said.

I nodded.

Dr. Dunant turned his dark eyes on us. There was a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

—That is well for you, my friends. You can leave. But what about my poor wife and me? She will tell them you have been here.

—Surely, they won't . . . I began.

—Death is the least for which we can hope, he said.

I looked at his eyes and knew it was true.

He put his hands to his face again.

—For myself . . . I do not mind so much. But for my Jeanette . . . He shook his head from side to side. —*Non, non!* I cannot let it happen. They will torture us, slowly, slowly. I know! I know!

Automatically, without willing it, I thought as a soldier. I thought of the well-marked map. If Dr. Dunant was tortured he might reveal what he had told us. They would move their installations, maybe even change their plans. Suddenly I realized what I was doing and I was ashamed of myself. I thought of Madame Dunant and the chocolate . . . the wine . . . the way their eyes had shone when they looked at us.

—We won't let her get away, I said.

—We'll have to kill the bitch, I reckon, said Britt.

It came as a shock, even though I knew I had the same thought in the back of my mind and had purposely avoided it. I looked at him. His face was cold, his eyes level. He always played it smart.

I thought it over slowly. If it had been a man, I realized I wouldn't have hesitated. Even a woman . . . running . . . at a distance . . . running to destroy an important mission,

to bring death to people I knew . . . to me. But to grab her in cold blood . . .

—We won't let her get away, I said again.

Dr. Dunant had been thinking, too. His eyes were deep. His voice was calmer. He looked at Britt.

—Yes, I must kill her. It is the only way. It is either she . . . or Jeanette.

We sat silently, looking at each other. Finally Dr. Dunant said, —You must give me a gun and I will kill her.

—We don't have guns, I said.

He searched both our faces with his dark eyes before he believed me. He put his slender hands on the table and looked down at them.

—Then I must do it another way, he said. I will open a vein, or . . . *non!* I cannot do that. They will know it is the work of a doctor.

Britt's voice was expressionless.

—We will have to use a knife or strangle her.

Dr. Dunant was calm now, deadly calm. —Yes, we will have to . . .

The door opened. She was standing there, the same wise, leering smile on her broad lips.

—Ah, see my beautiful bagatelles, she said. Swinging her hips, she came into the room. Madame Dunant, still white-faced, followed her with a small bundle, wrapped in a printed cloth. Mademoiselle Ronsard held out her opened hand.

—Are zey not *très chic*? She had a large brooch set with seed pearls and a pair of tiny gold drop earrings. She glanced at Madame Dunant and said mockingly, —My dear franz, Madame Dunant is varry kind to me, varry kind. She pulled the front of her dress open and dropped the jewelry between her heavy breasts. She laughed and pretended to shiver and said something in French to Dr. Dunant. He did not answer. His eyes were following her every move. She sat down at the table, crossed her legs and looked at us.

—We will have our leetle talk, eh? she said.

No one said anything.

She made an upward gesture with her hands.

—But why are you not happee? She half-closed her eyes and studied Britt. —Can you not smile? I do not think I want

you for my franz onless you smile. She turned and spoke over her shoulder to Madame Dunant. —Queeck, queeck, let us have some wine. That will make my franz smile.

—We have heard you have many friends, I said.

She turned back slowly. Her eyes darted quickly, watchfully, from Dr. Dunant to me. She smirked slightly.

—What you mean?

—I understand the Germans are your friends, I said.

She sat back with a little smile.

—Oh, pouf, ever'body my franz if they be nice to me. She narrowed her eyes shrewdly. —You be my franz also—if you treat me nice. I do good things for you. I help you—if you give me nice things. Maybe you like my help, *non?*

—No, I said.

For the first time I saw a glimmer of fear in her eyes. It didn't last long. Her face hardened.

—Who you talk to so?

—I don't want your help, I said.

The fear returned. Dr. Dunant was standing behind her, tense and watchful.

—Then I not stay here, she said. She started to rise.

—Stay where you are, I said.

Her eyes darted toward the door.

—Do you know to who you speak so? she said harshly.

She glared at me. I looked at her levelly.

—I go! she said. She stood up.

Dr. Dunant clamped one hand over her mouth, threw his arm around her body.

I sprang forward and caught her flailing hands. She twisted her head from side to side, trying to free her mouth.

I heard Madame Dunant gasp. She came forward, hands clamped to her mouth.

—Go! Jeanette, go! Dr. Dunant said.

—*Non, non*, she said.

Britt was on his feet. —Do you have any rope?

Madame Dunant stared at him uncomprehendingly.

—Rope! he said roughly. —Get something to tie her with!

The woman was struggling and kicking, shaking her head wildly from side to side. I felt her feet thump against my boots. She was soft and the stench of her cheap perfume was

overpowering. Madame Dunant came back from a corner of the kitchen with some short lengths of heavy twine. Britt grabbed them and I pulled the woman's hands behind her back. He circled them with several twists of the twine and tied them tightly, brutally. I thrust one leg around her body and held her legs while Britt knelt and tied them. Her thighs were heavy, quivering with fat.

Britt stood up and I pushed her down in the chair.

—Hold her mouth, I said to Dr. Dunant.

She was breathing heavily, raspingly. I snatched a dish towel off an iron drying rack attached to the stove. I slid it over her twisting head and Dr. Dunant withdrew his hand and I drew it tight over her mouth and tied it. Dr. Dunant stepped back, numbly holding his fingers. They were bleeding where she had ripped them with her teeth.

We stepped back and looked at each other—and at her. Her eyes glared with hate above the towel. Madame Dunant had her hand to her throat.

—What are you going to do? she asked.

Dr. Dunant thought for a moment.

—We will take her to another room, he said.

I took her shoulders and Britt took her feet and we carried her through the door after him into a bedroom. He motioned with his head and we placed her on the bed. I examined the twine around her hands and feet. It was tight, biting deeply into her fat flesh.

She began struggling again and her skirt worked up, exposing her fat, white thighs. Dr. Dunant reached forward and pulled her skirt down.

—Come, we will return to the kitchen, he said.

We sat at the kitchen table silently, looking at each other. Dr. Dunant had put a small neat bandage on his bitten hand.

—She must not be allowed to live, he said. It was the tenth time he had said it.

Madame Dunant was pale, her eyes frightened and tragic.

—Perhaps we could leave her somewhere, she said.

Dr. Dunant shook his head. His voice was almost sharp.

—*Non!* That we cannot do. If they find her, we are lost.

He looked down at the table. —They are not so kindhearted as we. They would not hesitate this long.

Britt's voice was cold.

—I'm not kindhearted about the slut. I say let's kill her and get it over with.

Dr. Dunant raised his head.

—You are right, my friend. You are right. He tightened his jaw and looked at Britt, then he sighed and lowered his head again.

—You are a doctor, said Britt. —You ought to know how to kill her.

Dr. Dunant's voice was almost gentle. —Why so a doctor? We do not spend our lives learning to kill people. He looked broodingly at the table.

—If I had drugs . . . morphine . . .

—We have morphine, I said.

He looked up quickly. —Where? Give it to me! Give it to me!

Britt and I took out our escape kits and slit the waterproof covering. There were three large-sized, government-issue, morphine Syrettes in each. Dr. Dunant read the printing on the little tubes. He nodded and stood up.

—It is a lethal dose, he said.

The woman had almost worked herself off the bed. Dr. Dunant leaned down and quickly, almost gently, straightened her clothing.

—Wait here until I draw the blind and prepare my office, he said.

We stood looking down at the woman until he returned.

—You may bring her now, he said.

We followed the doctor through a short hall into his office. The woman was dead weight, not struggling. The office was small and lined with instrument cases. The doctor's diplomas were on the walls. In the center of the room, covered with a clean sheet was an examining table. He motioned for us to put the woman on it.

Dr. Dunant moved calmly. He took a clean, much-mended sheet out of one of the cabinets and, after removing her high-heeled shoes, placed it over the woman from feet to chin. He spread a small clean towel and broke the seals on the

Syrettes and placed them in a neat row. He turned to us. —You will excuse me now, gentlemen.

As Britt and I left the office, I looked at her eyes. They were burning with hate.

It must have made it easier for him.

We sat in the kitchen, not saying anything, and not looking at Madame Dunant's dark tortured eyes.

After fifteen minutes, the doctor joined us. He had the pieces of twine and the empty Syrette tubes in his hand. He went to the stove, lifted one of the lids and threw them in.

He was calm as he sat down at the table.

—Jeanette, may we have coffee, if you please? When she moved away, he said quietly, —We must wait. She . . . the patient is now unconscious.

We didn't talk much after that. We sat quietly as the afternoon wore on, and every half-hour or so, Dr. Dunant would excuse himself formally and leave the room. When he returned, he always waited until Madame Dunant was not watching, and shook his head slowly at us. Once when he was out of the room and I was studying my map, Britt spoke.

—Do you have any special plan for reaching our objective?

—No, I said. —I have quite a few alternative routes worked out. We'll have to wait and see which one is best.

He grunted.

When Dr. Dunant returned to the room, Britt asked, —How well known is it in Sospel that Mademoiselle Ronsard is the Jerry commandant's mistress?

Dr. Dunant gave him a reproachful glance and looked toward his wife. Britt ignored him.

—Well, how well known is it?

Dr. Dunant spread his hands. —Everybody knows it.

—Do all the soldiers know it?

—All of them should, said the doctor. —She is seen with him everywhere.

—Does she drink? asked Britt.

—Yes, said the doctor,—very heavily.

—Would anyone be surprised if they saw her very drunk? asked Britt.

Dr. Dunant almost smiled. —Not in the least.

—How long will it take before she dies?

Dr. Dunant's eyes grew somber. —Five to seven hours, I think.

Britt looked at his watch.

—Before midnight, he said.

He looked thoughtful. —How long will it be before she's so nearly dead that she can't be revived?

—I cannot tell until I watch her progress, until she reaches that point, said the doctor.

Britt turned to me.

—She's our ticket out of here, if we play it smart.

I saw his plan. Two men helping the commandant's dead-drunk harlot home. That should be a safe-conduct pass if we weren't questioned.

—What about our uniforms? I asked.

—We'll borrow a couple of coats from the doctor.

—What about our equipment?

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

—Yeah . . . yeah, I forgot about that.

I thought over the plan, tried to think of ways we might return for our equipment, some way to cover it. I remembered the Jerry parachutists.

—Do people here wear smocks, Dr. Dunant? I asked.

He nodded. —Yes, some of them do, country people mostly. Our gardeners used to wear them. We have some of them, I think . . . somewhere. Madame Dunant had been listening. He turned to her. —Pépé's smocks, Jeanette, where are they?

She looked puzzled. —*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*

—*Les tabliers de Pépé, ma chérie.*

—Ah, yes, she said. —I have them. I sometimes use them to protect the tomato plants. Shall I get them for you?

—Yes, please, I said.

The smocks were worn and faded, made of a stout denim-like cloth. I put my backpack on and slipped into one. The sleeves were too short but it hung almost to my knees in front. Britt examined me closely.

—It looks all right from the front. It needs buttons.

—Those I can fix, said Madame Dunant.

Britt studied me. —It's better than nothing, anyway.

—We'll have to leave our helmets, I said.

—I have the thing for you, said Dr. Dunant. He left the room and returned within a minute or two with two berets. —Everyone in the valley wears them, he said. I put one on and turned to face Britt.

He looked at me closely from all angles before he finally nodded slowly. —We'll have to remember to keep facing Jerry and keep our mouths shut.

Dr. Dunant spoke, —You will not tell us where you are going?

—No, I said, I think it's best—for us and for you.

Dr. Dunant nodded slowly. —Yes, if we do not know we can never . . . never be made to tell. Madame Dunant shot a quick glance at him and clasped his arm.

—I would like you to show me the best way to reach a point on our route, I said. He followed me to the table and I spread out my map and pointed to a church located diagonally to the small square in front of the town hall.

He studied the map intently.

—It is not too difficult, he said, until you reach the cross-streets in the town. He pointed to the road behind his house. —There are no sentries along here. The road is watched by a patrol which passes hourly. If you wait behind the wall until it passes, you should find the road deserted until you reach here. He pointed to the first cross-street in the town. —What you will find there . . . He shrugged. —There are other patrols and I believe soldiers sleep in some of the houses. You must be vigilant when you reach this point. Do not go in the church. His lips twisted wryly. —Germans also pray. You will find a number of them there at all hours.

Madame Dunant was looking over his shoulder.

—The drain, she said, why cannot they use the drain?

Dr. Dunant looked thoughtful.

—Yes, perhaps they could use the drain. He studied the map closely again.

—It is not shown here, he said, but two years before the war, when I was a member of the town council, we constructed a drain to carry off water from this section. He circled the lower edge of the town. He knitted his brows. —I cannot recall the exact specifications, but I believe it is four feet high and six feet wide, made of reinforced concrete.

—Like a storm sewer, I said.

—Yes, exactly. There are gutter conduits every twenty-five yards along the streets and there are *troux d'homme* . . . man-holes, you call them, along—he paused and thought hard—at the intersections here, here and here. One of the points he indicated was at the intersection facing the town hall square. —The drain ends in a ravine here.

I had my pencil in my hand. He took it and made a small mark a short distance below the point where the road at the back of his house met the first cross-street in the town.

—I do not know what condition the drain is in, he said. It has to be cleared periodically and, of course, that has not been done for a long time.

He pointed to the mark he had made.

—But if the drain is passable, you could enter here and proceed under the town until you reach here. He pointed to the intersection before the square.

—Then you will be only a few yards from the church. It will not be a pleasant way to travel and I am not certain the drain is still open.

Britt had been following everything closely. —How many manholes will we pass before we reach the point we want?

Dr. Dunant studied the map a long time.

—It is the fifth, he said.

I refolded the map.

—Thank you.

Supper was not the pleasant meal luncheon had been. Madame Dunant had drawn heavy curtains over the windows, and in the weak light from a small candle end, the kitchen was gloomy and filled with dancing, heavy shadows. We ate a thick soup she had prepared with potatoes, fresh tomatoes and two tins of meat from our K rations. It was delicious.

After the dishes were cleared, we sat at the table, scarcely talking. Periodically, Dr. Dunant excused himself and went to his office. Each time when he returned he shook his head silently. Occasionally we heard voices and the muffled tramp of feet from behind the house as patrols passed along the road. We sat stiffly and looked at each other until they passed.

I could see the strain on Madame Dunant's face.

—We have been a great bother to you, I said.

—No, no, she said. —You must not say that. You have brought us hope. It is good you came when you did. One lives by hope and we had almost used up that which we had.

She put her hand on Dr. Dunant's arm. —We are not violent people, Pierre and I, and sometimes we have wondered if we were doing enough . . . if we were doing what we should do.

—My wife is right, said Dr. Dunant quietly. —For people such as we are it is difficult to initiate violence. We shrink from it and, perhaps . . . I say, perhaps, it is not a good thing. When I go to Paris and walk beneath the Arc de Triomphe and see the names of battles carved there and see the battle flags flying in the breeze, I feel ennobled. I am proud of France's valiant heritage, its military tradition. But there is some essential quality lacking in me. I would gladly die for my country. I would not hesitate to die myself but . . . but I do not like to kill. If all Frenchmen were as I am, France would not have its glorious military tradition.

Britt's voice was edged with sarcasm.

—All countries think they have glorious military traditions. Every African tribe thinks it has a glorious military tradition. Every black man who dances around a campfire swinging a cow's tail, every greasy little gook who pounds a drum, thinks he comes from brave stock. We put up monuments, too—big ones. And every cowardly little mill hand who ran away and got shot in the back, and every shivering little bookkeeper who sat in his own ordure in a hole and got blown to pieces, has his name put down as a hero. There aren't any heroes, Doctor. It's dog-eat-dog . . . same as it's always been.

Dr. Dunant looked at him silently for a long time.

—I cannot agree with you, he said.

At nine o'clock he left the room, and when he returned he nodded.

—She . . . she can be moved.

—When did the last patrol pass? Britt asked.

—I don't know, I said. —We'll wait behind the wall.

We put on our backpacks and the Dunants held the smocks for us while we slipped into them. Dr. Dunant angled our berets on our heads.

—I shall bury your helmets in the basement, he said.

We looked each other over carefully. It was a poor disguise at best. I took a deep breath.

—All right, let's get her.

• We followed Dr. Dunant into the office. The woman was still covered with the sheet. Her eyes were slightly open, the whites showing. Her mouth hung open loosely, tongue protruding. She was breathing spasmodically. Dr. Dunant removed the sheet and slipped on her high-heeled shoes. He pushed her forward to a sitting position. Britt and I each put one of her fat, white arms around our shoulders and lifted her off the table. She was dead weight.

As we made our way down the hall, Britt said, —We can't lug her this way. We'll have to tie her feet to ours.

—That won't look right if anyone stops us, I said.

—We can always cut her feet loose if we see someone coming, he said.

Madame Dunant paled when she saw us, but she set her chin firmly. We dragged the woman across the kitchen, her feet trailing on the floor, head hanging limply forward on her chest.

—Get some more twine, tie her feet to ours, Britt said.

Dr. Dunant got twine and tied her feet just above the ankles to our boots.

—We'll have to remember to keep break step. Now let's try it, Britt said.

We made a turn around the kitchen. It threw the woman's entire weight on our shoulders, but it was easier.

We stood at the door and gave our equipment one last check.

—I will wait beside the wall with you, Dr. Dunant said. Trying not to look at the woman hanging limply between us, Madame Dunant placed her hand on each of our cheeks.

—God go with you, she said.

Dr. Dunant put his hand on the doorknob. —Extinguish the candle, Jeanette.

She moved to the table and snuffed the candle. Dr. Dunant opened the door and looked out cautiously a moment.

—Come, he whispered.

The moon was much brighter than it had been the night before. The garden wall was plainly visible and the line of poplars along the road behind it was silhouetted against the

sky. There was a slight coolish breeze. Almost stumbling once or twice when one of us forgot to keep break step, we carried the woman to the wall near the gate, where Dr. Dunant waited. We crouched with our backs against the wall.

—We will wait, Dr. Dunant whispered.

It seemed a long time. I tried to forget the woman's arm over my shoulder and across the back of my neck, the slight convulsive tremors that shook her heavy body periodically. We had to shift our positions several times, stretch our cramped legs. Finally I heard the tramp of feet approaching, the rattle and jingle of equipment. There were at least eight men in the patrol. They kept silence. I heard the swish of their trousers as they passed. Dr. Dunant slipped to the gate after they had passed. Their footsteps had almost died in the distance before he hissed.

—Yes . . . yes.

We were already on our haunches. We stood up quickly and slipped through the gate he held open.

—Go quickly. May we meet again, he said.

SIXTEEN

The road was deserted, striped with shadows from the poplars. There was not a sound except our own soft, measured footsteps as we swung our legs in careful break step. We watched the road carefully, shot quick searching glances at each gate we passed in the wall behind dark houses. Twice as we walked along, mortar batteries fired in the distance. We heard their soft *thunnk, thunnk* and, after an interval, the rumble they made as they landed.

We had gotten the knack of synchronizing our stride. We walked briskly. We were almost to the end of the road. I could see the dark jumble of shadows made by buildings in the town. Two figures entered the road and started toward us.

—Over here, I whispered to Britt and moved closer to the wall. I halted at the first gate and watched the figures, hoping they would turn off. But they approached steadily. I twisted the handle to the gate and pushed. It gave an inch or two, then stopped with a slight rattling. I looked down and saw it was locked with a chain and padlock.

—Across the road! I whispered urgently.

We dashed across the road, almost skipping as we threw our bound legs high to carry the woman's weight. Low bushes grew thickly on the shoulder of the road. Six feet from the road's edge there was a shoulder-high wire fence. Britt went crashing into it before he saw it. I reached for my trench knife but Britt already had his out. He slashed our feet loose.

—Over the fence with her! I breathed.

We hoisted her like a sack of grain and had her hanging halfway over the wire when, unaccountably, her dress snagged on the wire. Perhaps it was a button or a loose piece of wire piercing the material. I never knew. I searched frantically but couldn't find anything. We tried to force her over but the fence sagged and hung tenaciously to her body. I heard voices, low and close by, the sound of footsteps. Britt heard, too. He raised his head and I saw his tense face. He took two steps backward and dove for the top of the fence, arms raised stiffly overhead like a diver's. He landed on top of the fence at his waist, then tumbled forward in a crashing somersault. As soon as he touched the ground on the other side he rolled over and over until he reached the shadows.

The men heard the sound.

I heard one of them say sharply, —*Was ist dass?*

I grabbed the woman's hair at the back of her head and pulled with all my strength. She fell backward, knocking me to the ground. I caught her sprawling body in my arms and drew it across my lap, bending my legs under me to hide my boots. I put one hand behind her head and buried my face in her neck.

At almost that same instant, I was aware that one of the men stood at the edge of the road, less than six feet away, looking at me. He called softly and his companion came up. The first man said something and they laughed. One of them

made a hissing sound to attract my attention and called something to me.

I didn't move.

They laughed again and moved away.

I clutched the woman tightly until I heard their footsteps die away. Then I pushed her from me quickly, sickened by the stench of her cheap perfume and the feel of her cooling neck against my face. I sat there, breathing heavily, until I heard Britt creep up behind me.

—Let's go, I said gratingly. I didn't give him a hand as he struggled back over the fence.

The woman was more awkward to carry with her feet trailing. I set a fast pace, almost a trot at times. Within a short time we approached the first cross-street. The houses were silent, windows dark. Somewhere in the town a dog was barking and, nearby, only a street away, I heard a vehicle start up. Less than a hundred yards to our right, there was a dark patch of woods. Somewhere in there was the ravine with the entrance to the storm sewer. I motioned toward it with my head.

—Let's dump her, Britt whispered.

I nodded.

He stepped from under the woman's arm. She fell forward, hanging limply in front of my body.

—Not here, you fool! I said. —Over against that wall.

He took her arm again and we dragged her to the side of one of the houses and let her slide back against it.

Britt sprinted for the woods. I followed him.

We found the entrance to the storm sewer easily. It opened at the end of a shallow, rocky ditch lined with dense undergrowth. It was littered by ration tins and cigarette butts, probably by sentries who had sneaked in during bad weather. We had to bend almost double to keep our backpacks from scraping the top. Within five minutes we were plunged in darkness so heavy it seemed to have substance, like smoke or heavy fog. We took our lights and flashed them around. There was a slimy silt underfoot, but the walls looked firm, almost as white and fresh as if they were newly laid.

In our crouched position, our packs threw an agonizing

strain on our legs. As we penetrated deeper, silt was piled higher. Occasionally there was an overpowering stench from the rotting bodies of rats or other small animals which had been washed down from the gutters of the town above.

I tried holding my legs stiff and waddling from side to side. It helped some, but after twenty minutes my knees were almost locked with pain and my calves felt as if they had been pounded with hammers. I stopped.

—If we don't take a break, I said through my clenched teeth, we won't be able to walk when we get out of here.

We sat in the slime and, grimacing and grunting, stretched our legs. After the worst pain had gone, I sat back and idly flashed my light up the tunnel. Fifteen feet away, almost obliterated, there was a row of footprints in the slimy silt. I brought the beam of light down closer to me. There were no footprints there. I sat upright and played my light over the floor of the tunnel. Then I sat back again, swallowing hard, feeling the cold in the pit of my stomach.

In the beam of my light, less than five feet from where we sat, strung out in a neat row like upside-down dishes, were three large mines. I took a deep breath and tugged Britt's sleeve.

—Mines, I said.

I felt him stiffen. He joined the beam of his light with mine.

—The bastards don't miss a trick, do they? he said.

Unconscious of the pain in our legs now, we got up and examined the mines. Britt looked up the tunnel.

—I'll bet we're near the first manhole. I bet they've crawled down every one of them and put out a row of mines.

He was right. Five minutes after we had stepped over the row of mines we came to the first manhole. I examined it closely. It was a circular concrete hole joining with the tunnel about twelve feet below the street. Iron rungs, imbedded in the walls, led to a cast-iron cover. It was big enough, but only just big enough, for us to squeeze through with our backpacks.

Fifty feet past the manhole, we gingerly stepped over another row of mines. At two or three places silt was piled so deeply that we had to crawl on our hands and knees, but we made steady progress and every so often I blessed Madame Dunant.

There was a row of mines at the bottom of the third manhole in addition to the rows on either side. We traveled more cautiously after that. At 2340, about two hours after we entered the tunnel, we stood at the bottom of the fifth manhole.

We were smeared from head to foot with slime. Our boots were shapeless gobs of it. Using our trench knives, we scraped most of it off and cleaned our clothes as best we could. I climbed the rungs and tentatively nudged the manhole cover with my head. It stuck at first, but finally gave. I clambered back down to Britt.

—I'll go first, and push it just far enough to one side for us to climb out. Stay right at my heels. If they don't start shooting at me, come ahead. If you do hear something, duck for it. If I can, I'll wait and help you put the manhole cover back. I don't want to leave it off. They'll investigate and find our footprints, and it'll be a sure tip-off we're in the town.

I climbed the rungs and, using my hand this time, pushed it up and slid it to one side. It was heavier than I thought. I had to give it three heaves before it was far enough to one side. Each time it seemed to scrape against the cobblestones loudly enough to awaken the town. I raised my head and looked about carefully. I was in the middle of the street in front of the small square leading to the town hall. It was much smaller than I had expected. There was no one in sight. I clambered out. It seemed a long time before Britt followed. He raised his head slowly and peered from side to side. I grabbed his collar and yanked him roughly. I pushed the cover back in place with my foot, wincing at the rattle it made.

I had already decided not to risk crossing the open square. I dashed for the shadows on the side of the street nearest me. Britt was on my heels. We slid along the walls of the buildings, throwing quick glances at each doorway.

We were almost opposite the town hall when a man lurched from one of the doorways. I don't know whether he was a civilian or a Jerry. But in the brief time it took me to drive my fist into his belly, I realized he was dead drunk. He grunted and bent forward, and my driving knee caught him squarely in the face. With almost the same move I darted across the street and dashed up the steps to the town hall. The door was

open and as I stood in the shadows, breathing hard and trying to locate the stairs in the darkness, Britt reached my side.

—We should have killed that man, he said.

—Too late now, I said.

The stairs were opposite us. We took them three at a time. There were three flights, each one narrower than the last. On the top floor, a ray of moonlight through a narrow window, almost as if it were shining there for our benefit, played on an iron ladder, leading to a trap door. We climbed it and found ourselves in the first loft. There was a wooden ladder now, tall and rickety. We climbed it slowly, clutching the rungs tightly every time it shook. I pushed the dark ceiling at my head. A small, unhinged trap door fell open. I clambered through, feeling bird droppings gritty under my hands. Britt followed.

—Draw up the ladder, he said.

—No! Leave it there. They may notice, I said.

I shut the trap door and lay back, breathing heavily. We were at Checkpoint 30. I looked at my watch. It was 0002. It had taken us twenty-nine hours and one minute.

It had seemed a lifetime.

SEVENTEEN

No one slept in Sospel that night.

As soon as Britt had checked in, I sent the first fire mission. It was the mortar position hidden in the ravine near the wrecked house. I pinpointed it.

—Checkpoint Nine; hundred yards right; seventy yards short.

As soon as the muffled roar of the explosions crept up to us, shaking the earth and rattling windows as it came, I repeated it again. I wanted to be certain.

Then, regularly, every ten minutes, I began ticking off the positions Dr. Dunant had marked on my map. I swept the wooded area near his house with air bursts to kill the Jerries

bivouacked there. I followed it with delayed-action shells to root them from their burrows. I used white phosphorus on machine-gun emplacements and motor pools. I swept the ravines where they had mortars hidden; blasted houses to bits; pounded culverts and vineyards.

I made the valley shake.

As one reverberating barrage followed another, an excited, frightened chatter arose from the darkened houses. Men ran through the streets, hobnailed boots clattering on the cobblestones. There were shouts and guttural commands as vehicles started up noisily and roared toward cover. Fires brightened the sky and even at our distance we caught the strong, pungent smell of powder smoke.

It was Britt who finally called a halt.

—They'll trace us if you don't stop.

I knew he was right. I took it easier after that, waiting an impatient thirty minutes or an hour before I unloosed another hail of shells.

We had hit Jerry where he lived.

Long before dawn began to lighten the sky, we heard him bringing in his dead and wounded. Long files of men shuffled through the streets, talking noisily, sometimes shouting. As dawn broke, they dwindled in number. But still they kept coming. We raised our heads cautiously above the parapet and watched them. One long line of wounded, wearing bloody bandages, sometimes helping each other, shuffled and limped close to the walls of the buildings across the street. Heavy curtains were pushed back and civilians, sometimes whole families, stood quietly in the windows, watching the men straggle past.

As it grew lighter, we realized for the first time how exposed our position was. We looked around nervously, feeling that we could be seen by the whole town. The parapet to the tower was only chest high. At the bottom, running around all four sides, except at the corners, there was a three-inch gap left as a drain. The gap was an advantage in a way. By lying on our bellies and pushing our eyes close, we had an unbroken view of the town, almost from the walls of the building. But it made us uneasy. We moved from the wall to the center of the floor, which was encrusted with bird droppings and littered with

straw and feathers and bits of twigs which had fallen from their nests on the ledges above. Directly above our heads, there was a large, rust-eaten metal box containing the works to the tower clock. Metal shafts, smeared with bird droppings, extended from the box to the four walls of the tower. Evidently they had worked the hands on the four clock faces.

The clock worried me. If Jerry decided to repair it . . . I tried not to think about it. We lay on our backs and watched sparrows dart in and out of their large, untidy nests. Occasionally a pigeon came swooping in to light on the rafters and strut back and forth, cooing softly. There were not many pigeons. They were too good to eat.

As the sun rose higher, I was surprised to hear the activity in the town. From the heights above, it had always seemed so deserted and silent. Now I could hear people walking along the streets. I heard housewives calling back and forth, heard children squealing as they played. Once I even heard the measured plod of a horse's hooves on the cobblestones. Britt also heard it. He grunted sarcastically.

—Milkman.

Under his cold, disapproving eyes, I wriggled forward on my belly and, peering through the gap, began to reconnoiter. On the street directly opposite, there was as much activity as would be expected in any small French town. Several shabbily dressed men were seated on the stone steps to one of the houses, smoking and talking. Small smock-clad children darted after each other around the steps and cellarways. Two housewives, kerchiefs over their heads, stood chatting in one of the doorways. As I watched, another housewife shook a mop out of an upstairs window. Three or four Jerries in baggy gray-green uniforms and jaunty, short-billed caps strolled down the street unconcernedly. I watched a pair of them, walking along, talking earnestly. The man on the steps didn't give them a glance as they passed. When the two Jerries reached the corner, without pausing they ran diagonally across the street and stopped in the first doorway. They paused there a moment, then dashed for the second doorway. A small, ragged barefoot boy was working his way down the street in the opposite direction. He came the same way. Midway in the block, he and the Jerries shared the same doorway briefly. They didn't look at each

other. I realized then why we had not seen any activity in the town. Even children traveled warily.

Behind Checkpoint 30, just over an edge of the building extending fifteen feet beyond the tower, Jerry had a motor pool. It had been there a long time. The ground was soaked and packed hard with black motor oil. I counted fourteen trucks parked in the area. Eight of them were German and in good condition. The others were commandeered French vehicles, old-fashioned and dilapidated-looking. In one corner of the yard, four Jerries in grease-stained coveralls were overhauling the motor of a large half-track personnel carrier. I could hear their voices as they laughed and chatted.

The small square in front of the town hall, really a yard, was bare and desolate. Grass grew from broken places in the cement. I could see the black, jagged craters made by my shells when I had shot in the checkpoint. They extended at ten-foot intervals right up to the edge of the front steps, which extended just far enough for me to see them. It was a neat string. I was proud of my handiwork.

I crept back to Britt.

—I think we can give them another fire mission now.

He looked at me coldly.

—They are going to get a fix on us if you don't take it easy.

I ignored him.

—Fire mission, I repeated.

He picked up his microphone, put his hand on the radio switch and waited sullenly.

I wanted to find out how long it took to blast a target in the town. As I had peered out, I had spotted a landmark I knew well. It was a large, two-storied building, a warehouse or factory, rising out of a cluster of buildings about three hundred yards to our right. In the past, I had dropped shells through its roof periodically, just in case Jerry was using it for barracks.

—Checkpoint five-zero, white phosphorus, I said.

Britt clicked the radio on. At the first crackle, he repeated,

—Checkpoint five-zero, white phosphorus. He clicked the switch off quickly.

I had been watching the sweep hand on my watch. I wriggled back to the gap and fixed my eyes on the building. I only half-

heard the noise in the town, as I thought about the activity our command had touched off far back up in the mountains. An officer at Fire Direction Center had looked at a firing chart and called out a command. Two computers worked slide rules quickly, expertly. One called out the target, another the elevation. A telephone operator had already alerted the batteries. Men on the artillery pieces had come running, had gotten up and cursed or stretched lazily. The telephone operator barked orders, repeated them twice. An operator at the emplacements repeated the numbers, sang them out. A sergeant twiddled with elevation levers, maybe the whole piece was swung around. A shell was rammed home. The breech slammed shut and was locked in place with a lever. Men stepped back, stood on tiptoe, opened their mouths. A corporal yanked a lanyard or pressed a button. It took awhile . . . it took awhile—to travel.

I glued my eyes to the roof of the building. It was on the way . . . it took awhile . . . it took a— Suddenly there it was. A splattering, rolling cloud of white smoke across the roof of the building.

I looked at my watch and smiled. Other small, white clouds appeared from nowhere and rolled across the roof, began pluming upward. I heard the angry swish of approaching shells. A mother screamed to her child. There was the sound of running feet. Then the flat rumbling explosions—one, two, three—and then I lost count. The roof was a mass of white smoke, mounting higher and higher.

I slipped back to Britt. The sound of the explosions was still coming in.

—One minute, thirty seconds. Not bad, I said.

We slept. Occasionally we ate or sipped water from our canteens. But regularly, every hour at first, then irregularly because I didn't want to set a pattern to warn them, we blasted another of their positions. As the afternoon wore on, activity in the town came to a standstill. Under our lashing, regular fire, the empty streets seemed tense and waiting. Mothers had called their children indoors and closed the blinds. The loitering men had scattered and run to shelter. Only now and then did a Jerry appear on the streets, running, looking over his shoulder as he dashed from doorway to doorway. Even the Jerries in the motor pool had disappeared. The half-

track was deserted, its hood off, exposing the gaping, half-dissected engine, like a Jerry lying in a field with his belly opened by a shell burst.

By 1720 we had plastered all the targets we had marked, including those given us by Dr. Dunant. Britt had kept a list. I counted the fire missions. There were thirty-three of them, excluding four targets which we had hit twice. There were a few of the targets which I planned to hit periodically. But, in the main, from now on we would have to concentrate on targets of opportunity. More importantly, we still had not done any damage to the vehicles Jerry had scattered about in the town. We had not crippled his ability to move in any direction.

As darkness began to fall we again saw the results of our work. In one ten-minute period, we counted twenty-seven stretcher cases—dead or seriously wounded. As we lay and watched, Britt exulted through gritted teeth.

—We clobbered them! Boy! Did we ever clobber the bastards!

The wounded were too numerous to count. They kept close to the buildings, hugging the shadows, as they filed into the town. Some of them limped badly; others had small bandages on their hands or held cloths to their faces. Our observers in the hills must have seen them moving along the roads. We heard shells raking all the approaches to the town.

One of the small, white ambulances we sometimes used to spot from the OP entered the street. Britt grabbed my arm tightly.

—Look!

The ambulance was barely moving, almost stopping dead every ten yards. Protruding from the flat top was a large, diamond-shaped antenna revolving slowly. Britt was cursing steadily under his breath. I didn't take my eyes off the ambulance. It crept up the street and halted for a moment directly opposite us. The antenna made two slow revolutions. It started forward again.

—Do you think they have spotted us? I asked.

Britt kept his eyes on the ambulance. His face was cold.

—No, I don't think so. They work in pairs to get a cross-bearing. We have to be transmitting before they can pick us up.

We watched the ambulance until it reached the end of the

street, halted briefly at the intersection, then slowly turned the corner.

—They know we're here, or they suspect we're here, anyway, Britt said. He turned and looked at the radio and looked back at me.

—We'll have to high-tail it out of here.

—Don't be a fool! I snapped.

—It'll be a risk every time we use the radio, he said.

—We'll have to take that risk.

—What are you trying to do, he snarled, —get us killed?

—We haven't even begun to accomplish our mission, I said.

—Balls!

We glared at each other.

—We won't leave here until we've found a way to get to their vehicles. That's what we came here to do. We'll keep our fire missions to a minimum, but we won't leave until we can blast those vehicles.

—Then I'll go by myself, he said.

We were looking deep into each other's eyes, hating each other.

—If you do, I'll put you in Leavenworth if it's the last thing I do in my life.

He made a snorting sound and turned away.

—Both of us deserve to be court-martialed if we leave here now, I said. —We'll get those vehicles first.

He turned his head quickly.

—All right, stop yammering about it. Let's get the vehicles. Where are they? Part of them are right behind us. He threw back his head toward the motor pool at our rear. —Let's find the rest of them!

I turned away, without answering him.

But I thought about what he had said, steadily, for an hour or two. The radio was almost, if not quite, useless. If we used it even occasionally, Jerry would smell us out eventually. It wouldn't do any good to shift it to another position in the town. One location was the same as another as long as it was within range of that slowly revolving antenna. If we could locate the vehicles, spot the dispersal area definitely, then we could withdraw from the town and blast them easily. We could take to the woods . . . go back and hide out with the Dunants.

The Dunants would be best. From there we would be in a position to fire on them if they started advancing. By keeping watch—maybe from the roof—we could hear or see them if they started the other way. I thought about it, examining all the possibilities, for a long time.

I looked at the sky. It was dark, very dark, covered with black clouds. I could only dimly make out Britt six feet away. He was munching a K ration biscuit.

—I've been thinking about what you said. Maybe we should run a recon sometime tonight and try to locate those vehicles.

I heard his jaws stop grinding the biscuit. He didn't speak for a long time. I expected him to refuse.

—All right, he said abruptly, coldly.

I sat staring at him, trying to make out his face.

—What smart angle are you playing this time? I asked.

—I want to get out of here, he snarled. —The sooner I get out of here, the better I'll like it!

EIGHTEEN

There was no moon. It was blanketed behind the thick, black clouds. It was also cold, bitterly cold in our exposed position. We sat wrapped in our shelter halves as we made plans.

He suggested that we wait until the early hours, when even drunks would be off the streets. I agreed and set 0315. He also suggested that we split up in order to cover more territory. I vetoed that, mostly because I didn't trust him, but also, partly, because I felt two of us would stand a better chance against sentries. We both had studied the map so often that the town was fixed in our minds. We agreed that the best plan was to skirt the motor pool to our rear and explore the center of town, where buildings were thickest and offered the most cover to vehicles.

We still were desperately in need of sleep. We dozed off fitfully, awakening from time to time to look at the crawling

hands of our watches. It was 0230 when I awakened for the last time. I sat up, pulled my shelter half about me, and listened for noises in the town. Dogs barked a few times. Far off I heard a baby, maybe a newborn baby, wail briefly; otherwise all was quiet. I looked over the parapet. I could barely make out the street in the darkness. The moon was still hidden.

At 0300 I nudged him awake.

—Time to move out.

We had decided to blacken our faces and hands, but also to wear our smocks because of the silhouette they made at a distance. We still had the tubes of grease paint Major Blaine had given us. It didn't take but a minute or two to get ready. I opened the small trap door and motioned Britt to go first. I put my hand on the top rung of the ladder and waited until it stopped shaking with his weight. Pulling the trap door in place after me, I descended the ladder and whispered to him, —Stay on my heels.

At the foot of the second ladder I waited while he closed the trap door and climbed down. It was so dark we couldn't see the stairs. We went down slowly, holding the banisters, planting each foot carefully. Dark shadows clung to the sides of the building. We were around it and at the fence to the motor pool within a few seconds. Keeping our hands on the wall, we followed it until we were around the motor pool and in a small alley, reeking with the smell of urine. We stayed in the shadows of the alley until we came to the first cross-street. It was silent, deserted. We dashed across the street and entered the alley again. We traveled for three blocks this way, not hearing a sound except the rustle of our clothing and the soft squeak of our boots.

At the third cross-street, I stopped. To my right, about twenty yards past the next intersection, three large vehicles —tanks or half-tracks—loomed in the darkness. I pointed them out to Britt.

—We'll go through the next alley, turn right and approach them from the rear, I whispered.

We were halfway through the next alley when Britt tugged my arm. He motioned to our left. It took me a moment to realize what I had taken for a wall or a low building was a stack of containers of some sort. I stepped across the alley and looked

at them closely. They were gasoline jerricans, stacked at least seven feet high and extending in a neat, unbroken wall for a hundred feet or more.

—Give me a leg up, I whispered.

He cupped his hand and I put my foot in it and he hoisted me until my head was above the stacked cans. They extended as far as I could see in the darkness. I had never seen so many jerricans in one place since I left our port of embarkation. There was no doubt about it. We had found Jerry's main gasoline depot.

I motioned for Britt to lower me and I explained what I had seen.

—Nice work, I whispered.

He grunted.

I stood there a long time, fixing the location firmly in my mind, trying to remember a checkpoint which could be used as a firing reference. Most of the darkened buildings looming on each side were two-storied. I would have to lob the shells in, pinpointing the target to be effective. I could use my coordinates, but they were always off a few yards. And yards were precious in this case. I looked back up the alley. It ran in a straight line. My best bet, I decided, was to take a fix on the nearest street intersection. From the tower I would be able to see white phosphorus shells burst there. Then I could shift my fire directly on the gasoline depot.

—I'm going to take a fix, I whispered to Britt. —Count with me, if you want.

Starting midway of the wall of jerricans I began striding up the alley. There was one yard to a carefully paced stride. I began counting them off. Behind me, by the sound of his footsteps, I could tell Britt was doing the same. At the end of the alley, I stopped.

—Twenty-three, I whispered.

He nodded. —Twenty-three.

I made a sharp right turn and started striding off towards the intersection with the same careful pace, staying close to the buildings. I was so engrossed in counting that I almost ran into the sentry before I saw him.

I stopped so quickly that Britt walked into me. My mouth

went dry. I had to draw deeply to regain my breath. I heard Britt's little gasp of surprise.

He was a short, stocky man, alert, holding his rifle at the ready. The long, sharp bayonet was poised a yard from my throat. I could smell his sour, unwashed uniform. I couldn't make out his face under his shovel helmet.

—*Ausweis!* he barked.

Passes! At least that was something. We looked as if we might have passes. I grunted and slapped my smock foolishly, as if trying to locate something. The bayonet didn't waver. Britt stepped up beside me, also pretending to search his pockets. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him edge closer to the sentry. He leaped forward. Without an instant's hesitation, the sentry swung his rifle to one side and hit him solidly across the side of his head. It knocked him sprawling. I lashed out with my right foot, felt the jar along my leg as my toe sank deep in his crotch. He bent forward with a hiccuping sound, arms thrusting forward as if to hand me his rifle. I snatched it and drove the end into his shoulders, just below the rim of his helmet. I stood there, bewilderedly for a moment, waiting for him to fall, until I realized I had struck him with the bayonet end of the rifle. I pulled it loose with a jerk. He fell forward. His helmet made a hollow sound as it struck the pavement.

I put the rifle down carefully and went to Britt. He was sitting up, dazedly shaking his head.

—Are you all right? I whispered.

—Kill him! he said.

—I have.

I helped him to his feet and, half-carrying, half-supporting, got him to the mouth of the alley. He leaned against the wall for a minute, rubbing his face and shaking his head.

—All right, let's go, he said.

We set off, running quickly on our toes, for Checkpoint 30. Our night's reconnaissance had ended.

I heard a woman's scream. Instantly I was wide-awake. Cold, gray light was filtering into the tower. I lay tensely, looking up at the rafters. The woman screamed again, a long, begging cry. I looked at Britt. He had heard. His blackened face

was tense, eyes wide. We heard the clump of heavy boots, another whimpering cry from the woman.

—*Non! Non!*

The sound came from the houses across the street. We rolled over on our bellies and put our eyes to the gap.

Two Jerry noncoms, rifles slung across their shoulders, were dragging a small, middle-aged Frenchman down the steps of one of the houses. Clinging to him and crying and sobbing *Non, non!* was a woman, her long, gray hair undone and flying wildly. She wore a wrapper and her feet were bare. At the curb, standing dejectedly, looking down at the pavement, was a file of a dozen or so Frenchmen, guarded by a squad of Jerries with bayoneted rifles. As we watched, one of the soldiers stepped forward and grabbed the woman and pulled her loose from the man. One of the noncoms pushed him into the column and barked an order. The line shuffled forward. The soldier held the screaming woman until the column had passed, then shoved her roughly to the steps and ran to catch up. She lay there, whimpering, until a frightened-face boy came out and helped her inside.

Britt grunted thoughtfully and lay back.

—They've found that sentry you killed.

—Yeah, I muttered.

—So much the better, said Britt. —As long as they think it's the Maquis, the safer we are. He rubbed his face gingerly and winced. Even under the smeared grease paint I could see a small, bluish swelling at the side of his right eye.

—How is your face? I asked.

He grunted. —It's okay.

After we had eaten, I took out my map and a small plastic T-square I carried.

He looked at me coldly.

—What are you doing now?

—I'm going to get a fix on that gasoline dump, I said, and sometime today, I'm going to clobber it—good!

He glared but didn't say anything.

The map didn't show vacant lots where we had seen the dump, only an unbroken line of buildings. But I had it located, anyway. I set to work to map alternate firing plans. I would use the street intersection as the first point of departure. If

that didn't work, I wanted to work from nearby checkpoints. I felt his eyes on me as I worked.

Finally he spoke.

—I'd like to make a deal with you.

—What deal?

—If I destroy that dump for you, along with maybe half the town, will you get the hell out of here?

—Maybe, I said.

—Maybe, hell! he exploded. —Our job is to cripple their transport, isn't it? Vehicles aren't any good without gasoline, are they? You don't have to blow them up if you can immobilize them!

He leaned forward earnestly.

—You've seen gasoline burn?

—Yeah, I said.

—Well, you know once it gets started, that's all, brother—you've had it. It takes special equipment even to get it under control, and they don't have that equipment. If a good fire started in that dump, those jerricans would melt like tin foil. In ten minutes, they'd be afraid to go near it even if they did have equipment.

—That's what I intend doing with white phosphorus, I said.

—Yeah, and you'll have Jerry right up here with us as soon as you snap on that radio, he said.

—What are you going to do—throw a match at it?

—I've got a plan that will work, he said. —If it does work, will you leave?

—I won't leave the valley, I said, but I'll leave here.

He looked at me for a moment.

—All right, he said. —We'll take some waste—we can chop up our shelter halves to make it—and we'll jam it down deep between those jerricans. We'll open up six or seven of them and slosh the gasoline around good. Then we'll toss a match and run back here and get our equipment and duck down in the sewer. They'll have so much to worry about they won't even try to stop us if they see us.

—It's risky, I said. —Real risky.

—Hell, everything's risky! Turning on the radio is risky. Just sitting here is risky.

—It's more risky than firing at it.

It isn't, he said. —You've got to hit that target right on the nose. And when you do hit it, you've got to pray that it sets the gasoline on fire. It will take a long time to put a shell in there just right. It would be a difficult target even on a range back home when we could be in constant communication. It might take an hour. And I know you well enough to know that once you start, you won't stop. My way is surer and it's quicker.

I knew what he said was true. I thought about it a long time.

—I'm afraid they may be alerted after last night, I said.

—No, they won't. That sentry wasn't guarding the dump. You saw the roundup this morning. They think some Frenchman killed him. There are plenty of places to hide in that alley. We can always come back if we see any activity, can't we?

Finally I said, —I'll think about it.

He shrugged and lay back.

—Okay. But remember the agreement was that we would pull out of here.

—I remember the agreement, I said.

I thought about it for a couple of hours. I looked at my map. He was right. It was a difficult target to pinpoint. I thought about the dark alley. It had seemed safe. And it was a straight line to the dump, only a few short blocks away. I weighed the risks. There was no escaping it: firing seemed safer, and in the long run, it seemed the most effective way.

I took my T-square and calculated carefully before I spoke.

—I'm going to try a mission, I said.

His eyes blazed.

—You're crazy!

—Maybe, I said, maybe not. I'm going to fire white phosphorus, using the street intersection as my reference point. I'll try and then wait an hour or so before I try again.

—You'll never get it with one barrage, he said.

—I'm going to try, I said levelly. I tore a sheet out of my notebook and, looking at my map, carefully wrote fire directions and held out the paper. He hesitated a long time, looking at me angrily, before he snatched it.

He snapped on the radio and, scarcely waiting for it to warm up, said, —Coordinates F-two, seventy right, twenty-three over. He snapped the radio off.

I slid to the gap in the rear wall, fixed my glasses on the rooftops in the target area, and waited . . . praying.

They passed almost over our heads, swishing softly. They were close together, very close. I heard them hit with a flat, muffled roar before I saw the white plumes rising from behind the buildings. I gave a grunt of pleasure. They seemed dead on target. I kept my eyes glued to my glasses, waiting for the first telltale signs of black smoke. I waited for a long time before I gave up. The white plumes drifted away. The rooftops sparkled in the morning sun, serene.

He hadn't moved, didn't look at me as I slid back to the center of the floor.

I waited an hour and five minutes before I tried again. I shifted my fire slightly more to the left, a little closer. He took the written directions and rattled them off hurriedly, as before.

They came in lower this time and there were more of them. One of them, a 105, was 'way off the target. It screamed by only a dozen yards above us and splattered on the edge of a building on the right-hand corner of the intersection. The others fell behind the buildings, but as their plumes dissolved slowly and floated away, I knew I had missed again.

Britt had crawled to the outer wall and was looking out into the street. Suddenly he hissed sharply and I crawled over to him. He flashed me a look of hate and nodded toward the street. I looked out and froze.

The ambulance with the slowly revolving antenna was creeping up the street. It stopped at the curb, directly opposite. I held my breath as two Jerries, carrying their rifles, tumbled out. An officer came from the front seat and pointed to one of the houses. They ran up the steps, two at a time, and one of them kicked the front door open. The officer scanned the buildings slowly. I stiffened as he looked toward the tower. But he looked away again. After a few minutes the soldiers emerged from the building. One of them had a woman by the arm. I recognized her as the woman who had screamed when they took her husband away earlier. The other Jerry had a small radio under his arm. I couldn't make out whether it was a sending set or an ordinary table radio. The officer took it, examined it and motioned for them to put the woman in the ambulance. He slammed the back door shut and crawled back in the front

seat. The ambulance drove away slowly, the antenna still revolving.

Britt's face was hard.

—Well, that fixes the radio!

I nodded. —I suppose it does.

After a while I asked, —What time do you think we should try to start the fire?

He slid forward eagerly.

—Early, very early. We should try to time it so we get back in the sewer just before daylight.

—That means we'll have to stay there all day, I said.

He shrugged.

—So what? It's safer than it is here. They won't be expecting anything just before daylight. Roosters start crowing early around here. Sentries always relax when roosters start crowing. It's something psychological about it. They begin to take it easy, almost as if it is daylight.

I thought that over.

—All right, we'll hide in the alley until they start crowing.

We spent hours ripping our shelter halves to shreds. We cut off strips and then used our knives and sometimes teeth to separate the tough threads. By the time we had finished, we had a sizable pile. For good measure, we added our handkerchiefs and undershirts. Britt was almost cheerful.

—Where will we hole up tomorrow night? he asked.

—Maybe at the Dunants', I said.

—Why not just keep on going?

—We haven't completed our mission, I said.

He started to say something, but changed his mind. He shrugged instead.

In the afternoon he slept. I sat, idly shredding the fragments of cloth, and suddenly, without willing it, realized I was watching him. I felt my hatred rise slowly and close my throat, surging through my veins. When I thought how he had held Monique in his arms, how he had . . . Monique! Monique! I had put her out of my mind, tried to bury her deep in my consciousness as I did so many other things which hurt me to think about. But now, suddenly, I remembered her eyes, the way she laughed, the way she used to take my arm. And he was

here! Here! Three feet away! I felt my hands ripping the cloth, harder . . . harder!

He opened his eyes, saw my face. He sat up quickly.

—What is it?

I didn't answer. I looked down and tore the bits of cloth until my fingers hurt.

NINETEEN

The long afternoon dragged by. The shadows crept across the floor and the sparrows settled noisily in their nests. Without our shelter halves it was biting cold. We huddled up with our arms and feet drawn close to our bodies, sleeping fitfully. I awakened every time he turned. At midnight I was wide-awake. I sat by the wall, staring into the darkness, waiting, thinking. Now and again the moon peered through the dark clouds, but not often and never for long.

At 0200 there was a clatter of hobnailed boots and the sound of slurred, drunken voices from the street. There was an argument of some sort and I tensed as one pair of boots thudded across the yard below. Britt joined me as I looked out. The moon peered momentarily from behind the clouds and I saw three Jerries. All were staggering drunk, but one was drunker than the others. He stood almost at the steps below, swinging his arms wildly as they tried to grab him. Finally he fell back on the steps. The other two Jerries each took an arm and went staggering off down the street.

We both remained awake after that. At 0330 I whispered to Britt, —Let's move.

We began filling the big pockets of our jump suits with the shredded cloth. We had to pack it tight, but we managed to carry it all. We wore our smocks and berets and left as we had the night before.

It seemed darker and much colder. The alley was as deserted as it had been the previous night. We walked as far

as the middle of the second block before I found a narrow opening between two of the buildings. I slid in and squatted down, Britt following. One of the houses was occupied. I heard someone snoring loudly.

It was a quarter of an hour before the first rooster crowed. We waited another ten minutes and then there was a chorus. One was so close by we heard the flap of his wings as he called shrilly.

We slipped back into the alley and moved forward, hugging the shadows. At the end, I waited a long time, looking up and down the street carefully, paying particular attention to the shadows where we had encountered the sentry the night before. There was not a soul in sight. Roosters were still crowing.

I ran across the street and stopped in the shadows and carefully examined every foot of the wall of jerricans. I was having difficulty regulating my breath. I tugged Britt's arm and we slipped forward to the cans. We grabbed handfuls of waste from our pockets and began jamming it between the narrow openings made by the handles and curved tops of the cans. Each opening took a handful of waste. Within a few seconds our pockets were empty. We each lifted down one of the cans from the top row. They were heavy and we had to ease them to our shoulders and then to the ground. The top of mine was stuck. But Britt got his open and it sloshed noisily as he poured it over the other cans. The raw smell of it bit deep into my nostrils. I lifted down another can. It opened easily and I tilted it and splashed it hurriedly. We took down another can each. Then another and another, working frantically. The smell was overpowering. We took down two more cans each.

—That's enough, I said.

I was already clutching a box of matches in my hand. I stood back four or five feet, took a deep breath and struck one. The scratch across the box seemed thunderous; the flare it made seemed bright as a searchlight. I threw it toward the cans. It went out as soon as it left my hand. Moving almost desperately, I stepped closer, struck another match and dropped it gently.

The sudden gigantic swoosh was almost an explosion. A blast of heat and light struck me in the face. I heard the singe of my eyelashes. It was, suddenly, as bright as day.

Britt was already sprinting away. I ran after him. The alley was brightly lit as far as the street. Britt looked back over his shoulder, slipped, and almost went sprawling. I almost ran into him before he regained his balance. I heard running footsteps, shouts.

—Faster! I said. —Faster!

Even the next alley was bright with the glare. —*We'll never make it*, I thought. I heard frightened voices in the houses about us, the slam as somebody threw up a window. I was almost at Britt's heels as we reached the end of the alley.

Suddenly two Jerries came running around the corner. Clearly, almost as if we were moving in slow motion, I saw their open mouths and the amazement written on their faces. Without slowing our steps, Britt and I plowed into them. We hit the ground heavily. I saw a jumble of feet and legs, heard shouts and, dazedly, realized more Jerries had been behind the first two. I grabbed for a pair of legs and yanked. The man came crashing down on me. I reached for his throat. Something slapped me a paralyzing blow across the arm. I grappled with my other hand for my trench knife. Something pounded me on the back of the head . . . and for what seemed a long, long time, I listened to the soft shuffle of boots and couldn't think.

It couldn't have been long. Dimly I realized there was the taste of blood in my mouth. My face was against hard cement. I raised my head. Something hard was pressed against the back of my neck. I shifted my eyes and looked back. I saw a boot and one leg of the Jerry straddling me. I knew it was his bayonet I felt. I turned my head sideways. A few feet away, almost even with me, Britt was stretched out with his chin resting on the sidewalk. His eyes were wide. The point of the bayonet was resting at the base of his skull.

The street was alive with the sound of hobnailed boots and shouts. The fire was still burning brightly. I heard the roar of it, the soft, plopping sound as jerricans exploded.

Somebody grabbed my collar and jerked me to my feet. I ran my tongue over my lips. There was a cut on the bottom one but otherwise I seemed to be all right. I looked at Britt. He was shaking his head dazedly, but he looked all right, too. Down the alley, the fire roared as high as the surrounding buildings.

A tall, thin, dead-panned Jerry frisked us for weapons and took our trench knives. He stood us up and motioned us to follow him. A bayonet prodded me in the back. We moved diagonally across the street while running Jerries brushed past us. When we reached the other sidewalk, my left arm was jerked backwards and the man behind me removed my wrist watch. Midway between the alley and the next cross-street, the tall Jerry entered a basement doorway. He held back a heavy curtain while we were pushed forward. The room was brightly lit with field lanterns. Canvas cots lined the walls. We had been within a few hundred feet of a guard post all the time.

The tall Jerry said something to the other men and left the room. There were six Jerries left. They lined up abreast, pointing their bayonets at us. We looked each other over carefully. I started to sit down on one of the cots.

—*Nein!* said one of the Jerries. I looked at Britt. He was staring straight ahead.

The commotion in the street had grown louder. Twice vehicles entered the street. I could hear shouting and boots clattering as more reinforcements came to help fight the fire.

The tall Jerry entered the room again, held back the curtain and clicked his heels. A short, dapper officer with a Hitler mustache and a shiny Sam Browne belt entered. He was followed by a burly noncom, carrying a machine pistol. The officer's face was crimson with anger. He faced us with hands on hips.

—*Qui êtes-vous?* he barked.

We didn't say anything.

—*Qui êtes-vous! Qui êtes-vous!* he screamed.

—We are American soldiers, I said.

His cold eyes darted over us quickly.

—So! So! he shouted. He grabbed Britt's smock and held it up.

—Not soldiers—spies! he shouted. He stepped closer to me.

—For spying you will be *shot!*

As he said the last word, he slapped me across the bridge of my nose with the back of his hand. I looked at him through a blur of tears and had to take it.

He looked at us a moment longer, snapped something to the noncom with the machine pistol and strode from the room. The thin Jerry followed him. The noncom unlimbered his machine

pistol and pointed it at us. One of the other soldiers reached out and snatched my pencil from my jump-jacket pocket. Another took Britt's wrist watch.

After a few minutes, the tall Jerry stuck his head into the room and called something. The six Jerry riflemen filed out, leaving us with the noncom. He was big and heavy, middle-aged, with bloodshot eyes and heavy features. Britt shifted his position and I saw his eyes dart to him uneasily. He made a menacing motion with the machine pistol.

At that moment I heard the shrill of a shell a split second before it hit. Our OP's had decided to blast the fire to keep Jerry away. I almost smiled. Other shells came piling in. Some of them were close enough to rock the building. There were yells from the street, the pounding of running feet. The Jerry looked over his shoulder toward the door. He was nervous. Another shell hit close. I saw him stiffen. He eased back a step.

I leaned my body closer to Britt without shifting my feet.

—He's a sad sack, I murmured. —Let's take him.

Britt blinked in assent.

I waited until the next shell hit. I gasped, opened my eyes wide, let my mouth fly open in exaggerated horror and looked toward the door. The Jerry turned quickly. Britt's head hit him squarely in the chest and bowled him backwards. Without slackening his stride he made for the door. I was right on his heels. The noncom hit on his back almost in front of the door. His machine pistol was cradled in his arms. I detoured only a couple of inches to dig my heel into his face as I passed him.

The whole sky was bright with the reflection from the fire. Shells still were thudding in. Most of the Jerries had taken cover. There was a small cluster of them around the corner buildings. Britt ran full speed for the mouth of the alley. I was not a yard behind him. Just as he darted into the alley, I turned my head and looked back. In the glare from the fire, I saw the noncom, blood streaming down his face, standing at the basement door, pointing his machine pistol. I sprang forward frantically. I was an instant too late. Sharply, but not too sharply, almost as if someone had taken an umbrella and jabbed me at two-inch intervals, I felt the machine-pistol slugs tear into my back.

I was around the corner before I fell forward, hooking my

fingers in the belt of Britt's jump jacket. It brought him up short, almost throwing us both to the ground. I caught a glimpse of his startled face.

—Let go! he said.

—I'm hit, I gasped. —Hit in the back.

—Let go, you fool!

I scarcely felt his hand in my face as he pushed me away. I fell to one knee. He turned and ran up the alley.

I put one hand on the wall and got to my feet. —*Why, I'm not hurt at all*, I thought. —*The bullets must have just grazed my jacket*. I took a couple of running steps and a sharp, twisting pain brought me to my tiptoes, wrenched an agonized groan from my gaping mouth.

—*Take it easy! Easy!* I straightened my shoulders, and holding my body stiffly from the waist upward, scarcely daring to breathe, I set off down the alley with long, measured steps. A wave of nausea struck me. I swayed toward the wall. —*Stay away from the wall. Don't touch the wall! Don't stop. You'll never get started again.*

Something warm was trickling down my back. My back was on fire. I tried to forget it, taking shallow breaths because deep breaths hurt so much. I marched almost at attention, arms held stiffly at my sides. Almost at attention, except for my silly legs. —*What's the matter with my legs?* The alley was endless, endless. —*Stay away from the wall!* There was something on my chest, something tickling as it dribbled down my chest. —*Why, it's blood. How can a man have blood on his chest when he's been shot in the back?*

I had a headache. —*Maybe Britt has an aspirin. Britt! That's it, think about Britt. Think about Britt's face when he sees you! Don't stop now! Britt! Britt!*

I was only dimly aware that I had stumbled across another street and entered the alley again. I didn't notice that day was breaking, that the shadows were disappearing. —*Britt! Britt!* Miraculously I was at the fence around the motor pool. I swayed toward it. —*Don't stop! You'll never get started again if you stop. Britt! Britt!* Through a haze I saw the steps. —*Checkpoint 30! Britt! Britt!* I reached the stairs, started pulling myself up by the banisters. —*Someone is groaning! Who is that groaning? Britt! Britt!*

It was harder to stand at attention now. Each breath jabbed me with pain. —*It's just like a run, like one of those long nine-mile runs at Jump School. Hang on! It'll stop in a minute. You've got to hang on until you see Britt!*

There was the iron ladder. —*You'll never make the ladder. Never! You'll never see Britt's face. Britt! Britt!* My arms were useless. I wrapped them around the ladder and propelled myself upward with my legs. —*Britt! Just a few more for Britt!* My head bumped the trap door. I gave an agonizing heave and somehow was through.

—*Just a few more steps and you'll see Britt! Think of Britt's face. Britt! Britt!* I clutched the ladder and started upward. It swayed crazily and thumped the wall. Two more steps, but now everything was a red haze. —*Britt! Britt!* But I hung on, not to climb, but to keep from falling.

Far off, as if at the end of a tunnel, I saw light. The ladder shook and I clutched it desperately. His voice was sharp, frightened.

—You fool! What did you come here for?

His hand grabbed my collar and roughly jerked me upward. —*Someone was groaning. Who kept groaning?*

The red haze cleared. I saw his face. It was near me, only a few inches away. It was hard, set, but his eyes were frightened. I felt my teeth bare in a grin. The haze cleared some more and I realized he had my jump jacket open and was examining my chest.

—Ah, Britt! Britt! You thought you had left me behind.

—Shut up, you fool! he snapped.

It filled me with pleasure to watch his face. I heard my rasping breath.

—It's not my chest, Britt! It's my back. They shot me in the back, Britt! They beat you to it, Britt.

He pulled me forward and looked at my back. He let me fall back and stood up, trying to fling my blood off his fingers. His face was hard.

—You've had it, he said. —You've had it—good! He saw the blood on the floor. He looked frightened.

—You fool, you've trailed blood all the way here.

I grinned at him, enjoying his fright. I didn't hurt any more.

I was numb . . . just feeling sleepy. But I couldn't go to sleep yet. I wanted to see his face some more.

—You're a real smart guy, Britt . . . aren't you a smart guy?

—I'm smart enough not to get killed, he said.

—You'll . . . get yours . . . Britt. Somebody'll see . . . that you get yours. I was too sleepy to think. I watched him through half-closed eyes.

He was taking off his smock, stuffing his pockets with rations.

—What are you doing, Britt?

—I'm getting out of here, he said.

I grinned.

—Would you . . . leave . . . your old friend, Britt? Leave . . . your old pal . . . to die?

—You're going to die, anyway, he said.

I felt a sudden surge of anger. I knew it was true. I had to catch my breath. I had to stop the tickling in my throat.

—Give me some water.

—Get it yourself, wise guy.

I gritted my teeth and pulled myself to my elbows, fighting not to groan.

—No. I'm not going to die, Britt. I'm going to live just to take care of you.

—Shut up, you crazy . . . He froze and lifted his head. There was the clatter of boots in the yard below, a shouted command. His eyes darted about. He looked at me and hatred glared from his eyes.

—I knew you'd bring them here! he gritted.

I grinned at him.

—What are you going to do now, Britt? What angle will you use, Britt?

—Shut up! he snapped. He stood stock-still. I could almost see his mind racing. The boots clattered loudly now.

—I'm going to surrender, he said.

—No, you're not, Britt . . . no, you're not.

—Shut up!

—That's an order, Britt.

He looked at me and made a contemptuous spitting sound. He picked up the smock and going to the edge of the parapet looked over and waved it.

—*Kamerad! Kamerad!* he shouted.

There were cries and muffled shouts and a bullet ricocheted off the parapet and went whining into the rafters.

He fell back, white-faced, breathing hard.

I croaked with laughter.

—Surrender, Britt. Surrender!

He raised his head and peered cautiously over the wall and waved the smock frantically.

—*Kamerad! Kamerad! Kamerad!*

Someone shouted something from below. He made a violent nodding motion with his head and again shouted, —*Kamerad!*

He stepped back, cocky now, almost smiling.

—Don't go down there, I said.

He didn't say anything.

—That's an order, I said.

He seemed amused.

—The general said to surrender, didn't he? When I see him I'll tell him you died a hero.

—I'm not going to die! I'm going to get you first . . . for Monique.

He raised the trap door. He had his little supercilious smile.

—You'll be seeing that nigger wench sooner than you think.

I spat at him as he went down the ladder.

I lay there hating him, knowing I was dying. I couldn't hold my eyes open. —*No surrender for me. Not for me.*

Suddenly I thought of the radio. It had to be destroyed. Jerry couldn't have the radio. I raised my head and fell toward it. I grasped the microphone, wondering if I would have enough strength to pull it loose—but suddenly . . . I almost laughed for the joy of it.

I snapped the switch and held the microphone close to my dry lips.

—Checkpoint Thirty . . . Checkpoint Thirty . . . Checkpoint Thirty . . . give me . . . everything . . . everything, dammit! . . . everything you've got!

I lay back, exulting as it snapped and crackled.

I had to see! I had to see! Chortling, making sounds like an animal, I rolled over and over, grimacing and grunting with the pain, feeling fresh blood running down my back and chest. I reached the gap. I lay there panting before the red haze cleared and I could see. A platoon of Jerries, rifles on ready, stood in a

semicircle about fifteen feet from the door. Almost as soon as my head cleared enough to see them, Britt walked down the steps. How could he have gotten there so soon? So soon? It was too soon. He stepped forward, back braced, at exaggerated attention. He swung his arms smartly until he reached the noncom in charge, stopped with that extra little swing to his foot, saluted smartly.

—You're some soldier, Britt! I croaked. —Some soldier.

The noncom motioned him to walk ahead, barked an order to the soldiers. I was too late . . . too late . . . I wanted to go to sleep.

I opened my eyes. I had heard it. And Britt had heard it! He shot one quick glance upward and dived forward face down.

—*Jump, Britt, I chortled. —Take cover, Britt!* I croaked with delight, howled with laughter, as the first one hit ten yards from his prone figure.

—*How do you like that, Britt! How do you like that!* Now they were pouring in, blotting out the yard with smoke and flying debris. I was deafened. I smelled the acrid smoke. I howled.

—*How do you like that, Britt!*

The building was rocking.

—*Who's dead now, Britt! How do you . . .*

The wall in front of my face exploded into a million bright fragments and I went to sleep.

TWENTY

I didn't die. They dug me out of the ruins and carried me to their hospital. I don't believe it was compassion. Maybe some young doctor thought I was a challenge. I lost my right arm and my left eye, and with the bullet holes through my body and my broken bones, I was unholy proof of what war can do to a man.

My outfit found me in the hospital when Jerry pulled out of the valley three days later.

I don't remember much about the two weeks I spent in Nice. Maybe I only dreamed that once she came and stood by my bed. Her old eyes were as level and wise as ever.

—I killed him! I killed him! I cried.

—I thought you would, Sammy, she said.

She died within the year. Her lawyer wrote to me while I was in Walter Reed Hospital. In the meticulous way lawyers have, he gave me instructions how to reach the plot in the Paris cemetery where she is buried beside her husband and Monique. As I was reading the letter, I remember a cool nurse came through the ward making a pulse check. She took my wrist and looked frightened.

—Don't worry, I said. —You can't cure this.

I'll never be cured
Completely.
But neither can I die.
Monique was right
Long ago . . .
A man who is supposed to be tough
Finds it difficult to say a simple truth—
But what I mean is . . .
I can't ever die
Again.
No matter what date they put on my tombstone,
I was killed in the war.
Struck dead
By words
From a stupid French housemaid.
And it's strange, isn't it?
Of all the men I killed
Only he . . . only he
Haunts me.

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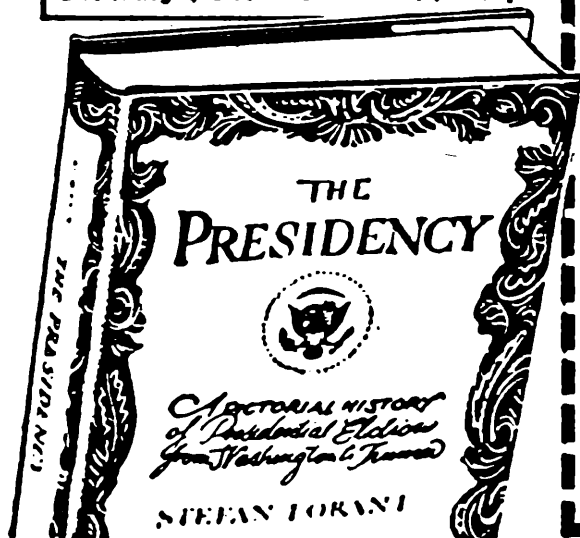
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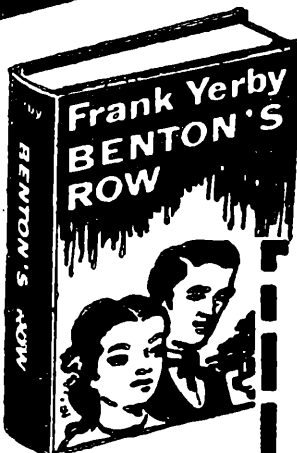
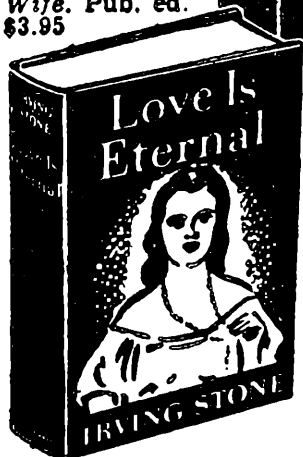
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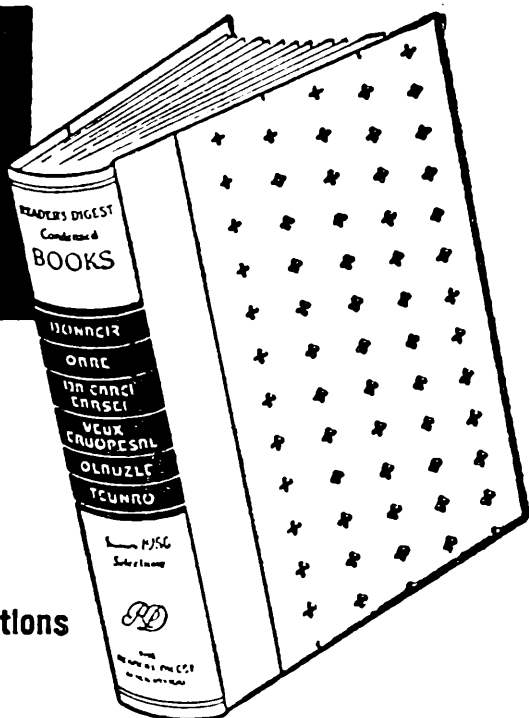
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